True at First Light Short Guide

True at First Light by Ernest Hemingway

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Characters

The central character and the omnipresent focal point of True at First Light is the narrator who is, in propria persona, Ernest Hemingway. Given this fact, the narrative's primary mode of being amounts to an ironic, humorous, and self-deprecating record of the interior meditative life of a writer set in juxtaposition against the life of action of a temporary game warden going about his duties. In the contemplative mode, there is much made here of the literary life, of the writer's relationship to readers, critics, biographers, and fellow writers. Literary allusions abound. For example, the passage which gives the work its current title (not Hemingway's title, but a good choice made by the editor) evokes both Virgil and Dante in a context dealing with art and truth: "We were all reading the Georgics then in the C. Day Lewis translation. We had two copies but they were always being lost or mislaid. ... The only fault I could ever find with the Mantovan was that he made all normally intelligent people feel as though they too could write great poetry." Of course, Virgil's attention to husbandry, to divinity, to a religious attitude expressed in the mystery of sacrifice, as well as his sympathy with nature, animals and humankind make this allusion most apt for game warden Hemingway. The passage continues: Dante only made crazy people feel they could write great poetry. That was not true of course but then almost nothing was true and especially not in Africa. In Africa a thing is true at first light and a lie by noon and you have no more respect for it than for the lovely, perfect weed-fringed lake you see across the sun-baked salt plain. You have walked across that plain in the morning and you know that no such lake is there. But now it is there absolutely true, beautiful and believable.

The writer's job, then, the true vocation of the central character, part-time game warden and full-time writer Ernest Hemingway, is to make his Africa for the reader, to make it "absolutely true, beautiful and believable" at first, and last light. His success in doing so will be determined, for most readers, by how sympathetically they respond to the complex characterization of Hemingway presented here. Readers familiar with the Hemingway Legend, in thrall to the Papa Myth and the insistent biocritical shadow of perhaps the world's most famous writer-as-celebrity, may have a hard time coming to terms with the actual character and his love song for Africa. First-time readers of Hemingway, with less cultural baggage, may have a better chance of doing justice to this complex character.

Other important characters include Mary Hemingway, Pop, G.C., Keiti, Arap Meina, Mthuka, Ngui, The Informer, and Debba.

Significant minor characters include Willie, Charo, Mr. and Mrs. Singh. The portrait of Miss Mary is centered on her quest for the lion and how she conducts herself in that quest. All in all, she receives good marks on this score (except for marksmanship). Other aspects of her character are revealed tellingly in her relationship with her husband—her generosity in regard to Ernest's attraction to his African fiancee Debba, and her fierce jealousy and protectiveness of her husband when it comes to any female contenders for his affection from and within their "white tribe." Her impatience with Ernest's joking, and with his "new religion," provide important counterweight in the

narrative. Her characterization is complex, and it is based rather closely on the actual relationship of Ernest and Mary Hemingway. But her character stands out as exemplary in her determination to follow Pop's code of the hunt.

Philip Percival, or Pop, or Mr. P, is the book's primary exemplar. Hemingway characterizes Percival as "my great friend and teacher ... a very complicated man compounded of absolute courage, all the good human weaknesses and a strangely subtle and very critical understanding of people."

He is "completely dedicated to his family and his home.... He loved his home and his wife and his children." (Here we note Hemingway's trademark repetition to emphasize a key value.) In the opening paragraph of the novel Hemingway identifies Percival as "a close friend of mine for many years. I respected him as I had never re spected my father and he trusted me, which was more than I deserved. It was, however, something to try to merit." The real Philip Percival was, of course, one of the most famous of all white hunters in Africa; the consummate professional, he served as guide for Teddy Roosevelt and many other famous clients, and he appears in True at First Light in his own name and identity.

While he is not physically present in the novel after the opening scenes, he remains very much in the narrator's mind and heart, and his presence dictates and enforces the ethical and moral codes of the hunt as conducted by Ernest and Mary as well as other native characters who had hunted with Pop. When Mary finally gets her lion and they have a celebratory meal, Ernest and Mary talk about Pop: "It was pleasant talking about Pop whom Mary and I both loved and whom I was fonder of than any man that I had ever known.... [It] was like having Pop there and I thought that even in his absence he could make things all right when they were difficult."

Another important character is the district game warden, G.C., also referred to as "Gin Crazed." His nickname notwithstanding, G.C. is an exemplary character who stands at the center of the inner circle of those who know "the values." Conversations between G.C. and the Hemingways reveal many variations on the novel's code of values. Ernest and Mary are always very happy when G.C. is in their camp "because we had become a family and we always missed each other when we were apart." A dedicated game warden, G.C. "loved his job and believed in it and its importance almost fanatically. He loved the game and wanted to care for it and protect it and that was about all he believed in, I think, except a very stern and complicated system of ethics." Since G.C. is, as Hemingway writes, "a little younger than my oldest son," he serves as the exemplary son-figure in the narrator's conduct-based tribal family, in much the same fashion as Pop serves as the father-figure.

Included in the narrator's family are many African characters, all of whom are vivid "round" characters, very much alive on the page and very important in the novel's action, thematic motifs, and scheme of values. There are no "flat" characters among them, no mere caricatures as the reader might expect to find in a book written by a "white" author depicting life in colonial Africa. At the head of the list is Debba, who holds the role of Hemingway's African fiancee. Although some reviewers have dismissed her

as a mere tacked-on "love-interest," she is a character of great presence and dignity, who is central to the process known as the "Africanization of Hemingway."

From the beginning, Debba's relationship with the narrator is based in "a great delicacy of courtship." Since her tribal custom permits it, Debba wants to marry Hemingway "by your tribe or by hers. . . . [If] Memsahib [Mary] will accept her." She understands that Mary is "the principal wife," but Debba wants to be "a useful wife," not just "a play wife or a wife to leave." While the Debba courtship plot-line may be one of the novel's aspects that suffered from the fact that the work remained unfinished at Hemingway's death, and the reader might safely assume that Hemingway would have developed the matter and brought more clarity and resolution to the courtship/second bride motif, it is nevertheless, even in its unfinished state, the most important sub-plot and sub-text. And Debba is, as the editor insists, a very powerful character and prime evidence against those "politically correct" readers who fault Hemingway's depiction of women in his fiction.

"Whatever the reader's opinions," Patrick Hemingway concludes in his useful character index, "he or she should pay attention to Debba."

Hemingway ranks his degrees of brotherhood with the Africans in his camp: his "closest friend and associate after Ngui and Mthuka" is Arap Meina. Ngui is Hemingway's tracker and gun bearer, a term that really means "native guide." No true hunter would let his rifle be carried by his so-called gun bearer; "A gun bearer," Patrick Hemingway observes, "was expected to have all the skills that General Baden-Powell and Ernest Thompson Seton thought a Boy Scout should. He had to know the animals and their habits, the useful properties of wild plants, how to track, especially how to follow a blood spoor, and how to look after himself and others in the African bush, in short, a Leather-Stocking or Crocodile Dundee." And Ngui has all these exemplary skills and heroic qualities.

Then there is Mthuka, who serves as Hemingway's driver. Like most of the characters in this fact-based novel, Mthuka is a real person in name and identity. Mthuka had been a driver for Philip Percival before he joined Hemingway's crew. One of Hemingway's "very close friends for a long time," he is depicted as an admirable character who would "never do a careless or irresponsible thing." He has "the best and quickest eyes," he is "ascetic, thin and intelligent"; he loves to hunt and he is "a beautiful driver." Third among Hemingway's closest African friends is Arap Meina. Hemingway regards him, as family, and Arap Meina tells people that Hemingway is his father and they have made the Pilgrimage to Mecca together. Arap Meina has a "great talent for affection" and he worships Miss Mary. Hemingway sees him as a fine man and wishes "that I had known him all my life and that we had spent our lives together."

Outside the circle of "close friends" two of the more interesting characters are Keiti and the man known as The Informer. Keiti is an elder exemplary figure, a long-time associate of Philip Percival, and the senior authority figure of the safari crew. As the editor notes, Keiti's "Edwardian opinions as to what was appropriate behavior on the part of Europeans differed little from those of the butler in the movie many readers may

have seen: The Remains of the Day." The Informer is exactly what he is called; he serves as the "Game Department Informer."

He also serves as Hemingway's go-between in the Debba courtship. Far from an exemplary character, he is not well-liked by the other African characters. But Hemingway depicts him sympathetically—"a tall dignified man" with a "distinguished" face who speaks "accurate English"—and The Informer is an engaging and very effective character.

In sum, the cast of characters in True at First Light is large and memorable, even such minor characters as Willie, the white bush pilot, Charo, Miss Mary's gun bearer, and Mr. and Mrs. Singh. Willie is "handsome with fine merry eyes . .. shy without any awkwardness," and he is "the most natural and best-mannered person" Hemingway has ever known. Manners rate high in Hemingway's code of conduct, as does the fact that Willie has "all the sureness of a great pilot" yet he is "modest" and "he was doing what he loved in the country he loved." In short, he is another exemplar of Hemingway's scheme of values. The admirable Charo, "a truly devout Mohammedan," a wise and "very truthful" elder, illustrates clearly Hemingway's respect for and embrace of cultural diversity. Mr. and Mrs. Singh, who are Sikhs, are compelling minor characters who provide further evidence of Hemingway's delight in the cultural richness of Africa. Thus, whatever some critics, in the current fashion of "political correctness," may think of Hemingway's claims of African brotherhood and tribal identity, Hemingway invests all of his characters with their unique identities and individualities, and celebrates his love for all of them, his love of Africa.

Social Concerns

This novel (or fictional memoir, or nonfiction novel) is the product of posthumous editing of an unfinished manuscript that Ernest Hemingway wrote in the mid1950s. Left unfinished and unpublished at Hemingway's death in 1961, the "African Book" (as scholars have long referred to it) was edited by the author's son Patrick Hemingway, provided with its current title (True at First Light), and published as capstone to the year-long celebrations of the Hemingway Centennial in 1999. Regardless of what may have been left out or insufficiently realized due to the incompleteness of the manuscript or the posthumous editing, certain key social concerns are clearly evident: 1) questions of racial and tribal identity and relationships in the waning hours of colonialism in Africa; 2) matters that fall under the ancient "man-and-nature" or, more properly, humankind-in-nature rubric, including numerous environmental issues and an examination of the ethics of hunting; 3) marriage complexities seen in the light of social and tribal intricacies; 4) codes of conduct—ethical, moral, religious—examined in the contexts of the sometimes jocular, sometimes serious "new religion" motif that is central to the book.

The narrator and the central character of the work is Ernest Hemingway. From his perspective as an acting game warden in Kenya, the narrator invites the reader to share in what has been called the "Africanization of Hemingway," to move beyond easy racial labels, and to inhabit truly the tribal complexities of Africa. During this process of Africanization, the narrator 1) criticizes many aspects of colonialism yet still grants integrity and dignity to certain British colonials; 2) treats ironically the rich European and American tourists who are the usual makers of safaris (safaris, we are given to understand, that have nothing in common with the narrator's biggame activities in Africa); 3) treats richly the racial and religious complexity of Kenyan Africa, the tribal and religious and Political identities (Masai, Kamba, Kikuyu, Mau Mau, Christian, Moslem, Sikh, Animist, etc.), as well as the place of Americans, Asians, and Europeans in Africa.

Hemingway's "Africanization" is grounded in his growing love for a specific part of Africa and Kenya, that terrain in the shadow of the Mountain-God Kilimanjaro; in his ever-deepening absorption into local tribal life, as hunter, friend and comrade, partner in "having fun" and in the "new religion" he founds with his tribal cohorts; in the delicate courtship of his tribal fiancee Debba; and in his sense of profound attachment to place, his love for the part of Africa that he never wants to leave. The essence of Hemingway's racial concerns here may be summed up as a dismissal of race as signifier of anything more than a kind of abstract categorization—what he really values is tribal brotherhood rooted in place and conduct.

As Miss Mary (Hemingway's fourth wife), another major character, puts it: "One of the basic points of the faith as I gather it is that neither Papa nor I are white." Hemingway projects his racial identity as American Indian and African Kamba. Toward the end of the book, when Ngui, one of his tribal brothers and partners in the "new religion," asks what he prays for, Hemingway answers: "Africa for Africans. Kwisha Mau Mau. Kwisha all sickness. Rain good everywhere. Happy Hunting Grounds." The translation given for

"kwisha" is "it is finished." Hemingway's prayer, then, calls for an end to colonialism, an end to terrorism, health and plenitude for all in the Africa he loves, the Africa in which he longs to stay.

Another social concern is addressed by Hemingway's brand of environmentalism, his presentation of the role of hunting and protecting big game and the land, thus seeking the proper relationship of humans and beasts, human settlements and the wild country. Early in the novel, Hemingway, who never hunted elephants and detested elephant-hunting, ponders the matter from the perspective of acting game warden: I was always depressed by this part of the forest. The elephants had to eat something and it was proper that they should eat trees rather than destroy the native farms.

But the destruction was so great in proportion to the amount they ate from the trees they pulled down that it was depressing to see it. Elephants were the only animal that were increasing steadily throughout their present range in Africa. They increased until they became such a problem to the natives that they had to be slaughtered. Then they were killed off indiscriminately. .. . There had to be some sort of elephant control. But seeing this damage to the forest and the way the trees were pulled down and stripped and knowing what they could do in a native Shamba in a night, I started to think about the problems of control.

Then there is the quest for Miss Mary's lion, which drives the plot and action for much of the book. Hemingway, as game warden, has the duty to kill any marauding lion which destroys livestock and preys on human settlements, so he meditates on the "difference between a wild lion and a marauding lion and the type of lion tourists take pictures of in the National Parks. ...

Picture lions that are accustomed to being fed and photographed," lions that when they wander from protected areas where they have "learned not to fear human beings are easily killed by alleged sportsmen and their wives. But our problem," Hemingway concludes, "was not to criticize how other people had killed lions ... [but to] find and kill an intelligent, destructive and much hunted lion in a way that had been defined if not by our religion [then] by certain ethical standards."

Indeed duty and ethics define most of the hunting that occurs. Here is another example of Hemingway's tonality regarding hunting-as-duty: That afternoon after lunch we did baboon control. We were supposed to keep the population of baboons down to protect the Shambas.... In order neither to sadden nor enrage baboon lovers I will give no details. We were not charged by the ferocious beasts and their formidable canine teeth by the time I reached them were stilled in death.

Hemingway sums up his hunting in this fashion: "The time of shooting beasts for trophies was long past with me. I still loved to shoot and to kill cleanly. But I was shooting for the meat we needed to eat and to back up Miss Mary and against beasts that had been outlawed for cause and for what is known as control of marauding animals, predators and vermin."

If duty and ethics define the game warden's responsibilities, the rest of the hunting may be summed up under the rubric meat-and-mystery. "It's wicked to kill things," Mary says. "But it's wonderful to have good meat in camp. When did meat get so important to everybody?" "It always has been," Hemingway says. "It's one of the oldest and most important things. Africa's starved for it. But if they killed the game the way the Dutch did in South Africa there wouldn't be any." And beyond the meat, there is the older mystery: "We were all hunters and it was the start of that wonderful thing, the hunt. There is much mystic nonsense written about hunting but it is something that is probably much older than religion. Some are hunters and some are not."

Other social concerns include the analysis of marriage projected through Hemingway's portrayal of his relationship with his wife Mary and his tribal fiancee Debba.

Perhaps the cross-cultural contrasts of marriage would have received more development if Hemingway had finished the book.

Nevertheless, even as it stands here, the portrait of Ernest and Mary's marriage, with all of its competition, cruelty, jealousy— what the narrator calls the "incalculable casualties of marriage"—balanced by their efforts to love each other well and truly, is the most complex treatment of marriage in Hemingway's work. Finally, the most resonant and comprehensive social concern, which covers all aspects of conduct—social, ethical, moral, religious—is centered in Hemingway's "new religion" leitmotif, which is best discussed under the heading of themes.

Techniques

The first caution when discussing techniques in True at First Light is this: the reader is dealing with an unfinished work, posthumously edited and severely cut in length without any direction from the writer.

Whatever conclusions might be drawn concerning Hemingway's techniques may well need some revision when another version of the work appears, as it will in the future (a more complete edition is in the planning stages). That said, the reader may still confidently judge such matters as Hemingway's handling of point of view, especially with regard to the delicate relationship between autobiography and creative narration, or fact and fiction. All critical discussion must be premised on the recognition that this is not a mere "journal," a factual record of events. And it may be misleading to consider it a "fictionalized memoir," as it has also been called. The best description may be that of the editor who calls it "a fiction" and stresses that "ambiguous counter-point between fiction and truth lies at the heart of this memoir." Of course, this is probably true of all memoirs.

Readers familiar with Hemingway's earlier works (e.g., In Our Time and The Sun Also Rises) will recognize his deployment of familiar techniques: a modernist strategy of allusion, symbolic landscape, understatement (see Hemingway's well-known "iceberg theory" of writing and his "theory of omission"), skillful use of repetition, parallelism and counter-point, and variation and modulation of sentence rhythms according to principles that have more to do with poetry than with conventional prose. Allusions are abundant in True at First Light, especially literary allusions. Readers must do their homework to recognize unidentified literary quotations, and to understand the contextual implications of Hemingway's many allusions to such writers as Dante, D. H. and T. E. Lawrence, Orwell, and Virgil. Hemingway's use of landscape, or paysage moralise, terrain suffused with history and spirit, numinous landscape that points toward the deepest significations of the work, is crucial. The entire book takes place in the shadow of the Mountain-God Kilimanjaro, which is the Deus Loci, the Spirit of Place. Readers will want to refer to Hemingway's use of the mountain in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," where the mountain is identified as the "House of God," the destination of the flight of the soul.

While Hemingway's techniques, devices, and style remain constant throughout his work, some readers will detect in True at First. Light, a certain loosening of his severely disciplined style and his economy of narration. He is much more willing to talk explicitly and effusively about certain matters (e.g., religion) that were merely implied or extremely understated in his earlier work. Readers might thus conclude that he has abandoned his "iceberg theory," that he has decided to place everything on the textual surface rather than to allow key motifs and images to reverberate beneath the surface. Yet it could be argued that this entire book is grounded in and conditioned by Hemingway's long-standing principle of omission of crucial facts; in this case, the two well-known plane crashes that almost killed Hemingway a few weeks after the chronological moment when True at First Light ends. Those crashes are foreshadowed

unobtrusively in the text, and that neardeath experience that is not narrated conditions everything that transpires in the novel.

Themes

The theme at the very heart of Hemingway's African pilgrimage centers on matters of religion. Religious motifs and images are so pervasive that the subject should be allotted much more than the brief space allowed here for such analysis. Statistical survey of key passages and allusions dealing with religion reveals at least 85 such occurrences. Likewise, references to the marijuana-effect Christmas Tree that Miss Mary quests for so assiduously amount to more than 30. And there are many references to the "Birthday of the Baby Jesus" and other formulations, some serious, some hilarious, involving the words "Baby Jesus"—e.g., when they go to dig up the magic Christmas Tree, Hemingway says they are "working for the Forestry Department of Our Lord, the Baby Jesus." There are dozens of such "Baby Jesus" references; and there are dozens of citations of the Mountain-God Kilimanjaro. As Sports Illustrated noted long ago, when it published portions of this manuscript in 1971-72, religion comes up "repeatedly, often in a humorous connotation; but at heart it [is] no laughing matter."

Some Hemingway commentators have found that the weakest part of the book is Hemingway's new religious mythology, and dismissed it as humor, as comic play, that diminishes the effect of the work. But they have missed the point; as is always the case with Hemingway, religion is a serious matter. Hemingway did not go to Africa, and Pilgrims do not make pilgrimages, just for laughs.

In any case, there are, no doubt, dissertations, essays, and books already in progress on Hemingway's "New Religion" in True at First Light. Some of these studies will most likely see the "new religion" as a rejection of Christianity, or as Hemingway's farewell to Catholicism, which had informed his life and work since his conversion to Catholicism when he was a teenager. Other studies of the question may be sophisticated enough, it is to be hoped, to recognize that Hemingway's vision of Catholicism in relation to his African tribal religion is subsumptive, that beneath all the comic play with religion, there is a syncretic religious thesis at work, a syncretistic drive to reconcile, to localize and thus truly universalize his fundamental Catholic beliefs.

Under the rubric of syncretism True at First Light might seem to some students of Church history to be an adumbration of post-Vatican Two trends, and Hemingway might be seen as a kind of forerunner, a prophet of ecumenical inclusiveness and new modalities of worship. Here, for example, is Papa describing what Mary calls "Papa's religion": "We retain the best of various other sects and tribal law and customs. But we weld them into a whole that all can believe." All on one page "Papa's religion" is described as a "new religion," as a "frightfully old religion," as a religion that Papa makes "more complicated every day," and as a "revealed" religion rooted in Papa's "early visions." Whatever is serious, whatever is jocular, one theme remains constant: the syncretistic drive to reconcile the local and the universal.

Yet, in spite of all the syncretistic emphasis, Catholic themes familiar from Hemingway's earlier work persist—such as the rejection of certain aspects of Protestantism.

For example, one rather unpleasant character who wants to convert to Hemingway's "new religion" is a Protestant, educated by Protestant missionaries. Hemingway notes that he has "strong black shoes to prove his Christianity." He tells Hemingway he is not Catholic. Hemingway replies: "I thought you were not of that faith from the shoes."

The Protestant says: "We have many things in common with the Catholic faith but we do not worship images." "Too bad," Hemingway says. "There are many great images." When this character, renamed Peter by Hemingway, wants to convert, he will have to take off his Protestant shoes and learn to appreciate images. Later, when he tells Hemingway proudly that he never speaks "of the Baby Jesus except with contempt," Hemingway warns him: "We may need the Baby Jesus. Never speak of him with disrespect." And what else would Papa say, in a book that tends toward Christmas and the "Baby Jesus" on every other page?

There is much more in the religious design—throw in Gitchy Manitou, the Great Spirit, the Happy Hunting Grounds, add sacred trees and mountains and African religious ceremonies, animistic and Muslim references, meditations on the soul, pilgrimage allusions involving Rome, Mecca, and Santiago de Compostela, and the reader will have some notion of how rich the religious mix is. But readers who have not studied the omitted portions of the manuscript should tread cautiously before drawing firm conclusions about this serio-comic melange, and should remember also that Hemingway is always serious about religion, which is precisely why he jokes about it. Never preachy, True at First Light rides on the syntax of spirituality, moves in religious rhythms that alternate between mystical meditation and epiphanic moments and the self-deprecatory mockery of Papa, leader of the "new religion."

One striking example may be seen in the sequence of movements that begins with the death of Mary's lion. First, there is ceremonial drinking; then, Hemingway writes, "I drank and then lay down by the lion ... and begged his pardon for us having killed him and while I lay beside him I felt for the wounds.... I drew a fish in front of him with my forefinger in the dirt and then rubbed it out with the palm of my hand." This Ichthus-ceremony (the fish as symbol of Christ) then flows directly into a meditation on the dark night of the soul and leads eventually to a quasi Eucharistic meal: "It was wonderful to be eating the lion and have him in such close and final company and tasting so good." These incarnational moments of epiphanic communion with and in and through the body and blood of the lion are followed almost immediately by a sequence of self-mockery and mocking of religious cliches. Papa, paraphrasing the 18th-century Protestant hymn-writer Isaac Watts, tells his friend G.C. that "Satan will find work for idle hands to do." He asks— in inflated preacherly mode—if G.C. "will carry these principles into Life." Drinking a ceremonial beer (and beer drinking functions throughout the work as a ritual act of communion), G.C. says "Drink your beer, Billy Graham." If we read Hemingway accurately and well, such joking does not undercut but underlines the seriousness of religious matters. Beyond all irony, Hemingway's work is about carrying principles into action, and he is a kind of evangelist always teaching ethical and moral and spiritual codes of conduct, even in the very rhythms and syntax of his prose. As the Nobel Prize-winning poet Derek Walcott observed, the "sacred" is "even in the sound of Hemingway's prose" and in "the moral severity of his sentences." Walcott sees

Hemingway's writing as "evangelical" in its hope for innocence and redemption; and he finds in Hemingway the "romance of the Protestant for the Catholic," "Franciscan tenderness towards animals," and "Biblebased moral conviction." While Walcott's observations refer to Hemingway's work in general, they are particularly apt for True at First Light; moreover, they confirm the view that Hemingway's narrativity, his storytelling and his style are profoundly religious, are (as Flannery O'Connor remarked) "God-haunted"; and Hemingway's ultimate subject (as Reynolds Price noted) is indeed "Saintliness." Hemingway's vocation does not take the same form as Billy Graham's; yet, at any given moment in Hemingway's fiction, it is always the Hour of Decision.

Students of True at First Light should be reluctant to make sweeping judgments regarding Hemingway and religion based on this published version, which might leave some readers with the feeling, for example, that Hemingway had actually become a true worshiper of the Mountain-God Kilimanjaro. Before reaching such a conclusion, careful consideration should be given to such omitted manuscript passages as this one: "We all worshiped the mountain with our borrowed and insecure religion . .. but she belonged to another people and we loved her but we knew that we were strangers and we looked at her as a boundary and a delight and a source of coolness and something to be enjoyed and loved. But she was another people's God." It should also be remembered that as he was writing his African pilgrimage, he was still praying at the Cathedrals of San Marco and Chartres and Burgos and Segovia, and still remaking segments of his old beloved Catholic pilgrimages of Santiago de Compostela and les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer.

Another major theme, already treated in part under "social concerns" (see above), involves the motifs and image-clusters that address matters of nature, hunting, and environmentalism. Much of what Hemingway has to say about hunting-as-ritual, about ethical standards of hunting, about his duty as a game warden, is precisely what we would expect from Hemingway. But there are some surprising variations in True at First Light on the theme of nature—e.g., Hemingway the Bird-watcher. He and Miss Mary study bird books and observe the extraordinary bird life very carefully, and Mary does so with greater precision. This leads Hemingway to write, after the lion quest is over: "by hunting one beast too hard and concentrating on him I had missed much in not observing the birds properly....

I had neglected them terribly. Reading the bird book I felt how stupid I had been and how much time I had wasted." He thinks of all the birds—their movements, colors, songs—that he loves to watch at home in Cuba and resolves to study African bird life with the same love and attention. Then he pronounces a touchstone value in his code for the well-lived life: "This looking and not seeing things was a great sin, I thought, and one that was easy to fall into. It was always the beginning of something bad and I thought that we did not deserve to live in the world if we did not see it."

Yet another primary theme, which resonates with the "social concerns" described above, and pervades the book as thematic focus, is the "Africanization of Hemingway." At the beginning, Hemingway states his love for Africa, then he narrows the range of that love to a specific part of Africa, Kenya, and then to the particular tribal part of Kenya that he most loves, that he wants "to know more about.. . than [he] had any right to

know." He is there not as a tourist, not as just another rich and fashionable maker of safaris, but "to learn and to know about everything" and to do this not to serve some anthropo-missionary goal but in order to become increasingly a part of local tribal life. He stresses this intense localism throughout; he thinks "how lucky we were this time in Africa to be living long enough in one place so that we knew the individual animals and knew the snake holes and the snakes that lived in them.

When I had first been in Africa we were always in a hurry to move from one place to another to hunt beasts for trophies." Although all white people are here called "Europeans," Hemingway emphatically asserts that he is "not a European," not "white"—he is an American and his American identity is proclaimed as Indian. That is to say, the primary mode of identity in this Hemingway work, as in most, is tribal and local. In this version of selective tribalism, nearly every chapter has some indication of Hemingway's identification with, then his participation in, and finally his rootedness and membership in place and in the Kamba tribe.

Near the end of the book, Mary says that she wants "to go and really see something of Africa.. .. You don't have any ambition.

You'd just as soon stay in one place." To which Ernest replies: "Have you ever been in a better place?" And again, more firmly: "I'd rather live in a place and have an actual part in the life of it than just see new strange things" (emphasis added). Of course, contrary to the popular view and the usual biocritical view, this has always been the fundamental Hemingway mode of being: in France, or Cuba, or Africa. He is never a tourist, always a local or in the process of being localized, or longing to be a member of a selected community, or creating a new tribe or community, rooted in place, in the best traditions of the best places.

Among secondary themes, the Mau Mau revolt and the weakening of British colonial power in Kenya is present mainly as a plot device, with the threat of a Mau Mau attack on the hunting camp serving to lend suspense and tension to the action of the first six chapters. Finally, what some readers may regard as a major theme of this work, the relationship of the author to his autobiographical material, the nature of the interplay of fact, fiction, and truth may best be treated below under the rubrics of "Techniques" and "Characters."

Literary Precedents

The history of the book—memoir or fiction—written about Africa by Americans and Europeans has a rich tradition. Asked about literary precedents in this mode, Hemingway's son Patrick noted that the tradition "started with Olive Schreiner in the 19th century, who wrote a book called The Story of an African Farm which was very popular.... Wonderful book." Schreiner, a South African, was the first colonial African writer to receive widespread recognition for her evocations of the African people and landscape in her fiction, as well as for her role as a champion of women's rights and advocate for the freedom and dignity of Africans suffering under colonialism. Another important writer in this vein is Isak Dinesen (pen name of Karen Blixen), a native of Denmark who lived in Kenya and wrote the widely praised Out of Africa (1937).

Hemingway knew the Blixens (he used her husband Baron von Blixen in his writing) and he admired Out of Africa. Patrick Hemingway also cites Doris Lessing and the "so-called Martha Quest novels" as a literary precedent for his father's work. Lessing, especially in her early novels, deals with white-black relations and colonialism in Africa. Hemingway probably knew this work (The Grass is Singing (1950) and the first two Martha Quest novels, Martha Quest (1952) and A Proper Marriage (1954)). Patrick Hemingway asserts that his father knew the work of all three of these extraordinary women writers on Africa, and that their writing on Africa "made it extremely difficult for him to write this book. He had them all in mind."

Readers searching for literary precedents and influences should also bear in mind such works as Teddy Roosevelt's African Game Trails. From boyhood, Hemingway was an admirer of Teddy Roosevelt and he certainly knew African Game Trails. The reader will recall that Hemingway's primary exemplar in his African books, Philip Percival, had served as Roosevelt's guide in Africa. Hemingway also knew and admired Beryl Markham's 1942 memoir West With the Night, praising it as "really a bloody wonderful book." It is surely more than coincidental that one of Hemingway's closest friends in True at first Light, Arap Meina, has the same name as the African guide who took Beryl Markham hunting in West With the Night. Hemingway then, knew well his predecessors in the mode of the African memoir and novel. Hemingway always did his homework—a voracious reader, he acquired deep and scholarly knowledge of any subject that interested him—and his best readers will do their homework, too, if they wish truly to understand Hemingway's work.

Related Titles

The most important related title is Green Hills of Africa (1935), Hemingway's first fact-based "fiction" about Africa. This work is now considered one of the first of its kind, a prototype for the "non-fiction novel." In the foreword to Green Hills of Africa Hemingway wrote: "Unlike many novels, none of the characters or incidents in this book is imaginary. Any one not finding sufficient love interest is at liberty, while reading it, to insert whatever love interest he or she may have at the time. 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." True at First Light revisits this mode, as it revisits familiar characters from the earlier African book (Hemingway, Philip Percival, Charo), and many themes and techniques that the two books share can be profitably compared and contrasted. Given Hemingway's wry remark about "love interest" in his foreword, the reader will note that he has supplied that element—with the Debba courtship—in his second African book. Yet the deepest "love interest" remains constant in both works—his profound love for Africa.

Other related titles include the two classic African stories, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." Another text that resonates bodies. (You may wish to compare the with True at First Light is the African section earlier portrait of Pop in Green Hills of of The Garden of Eden, another unfinished Africa.)

and posthumously edited novel that Hemingway was working on during the 1950s. 5. There are numerous exemplars in True at First Light; identify at least four of them. Do they all exemplify the same positive values, the same code of conIDEAS FOR GROUP DISCUSSIONS duct? What, specifically, does this "code" tell us about how to behave, how to live Discussions might usefully begin with our lives? comparison of other works that contain 6. Analyze Miss Mary's quest for the lion. some of the same elements: memoir or fact-Why must she hunt it in a certain way? based fiction; the human and writerly prob-More generally, consider the reasons lems inherent in a work written by a "for-for hunting presented in the book. Given eigner" or "outsider" who loves, and wants the evidence of this novel, should huntto celebrate, a place and culture in which ing be banned? Why? Why not? the writer was not born and raised; themes of hunting and quest; religious motifs and 7. Analyze the specific tenets of Hemingthe desire to make religion more inclusive; way's "new religion." How serious is the legacies of colonialism; the nature of Hemingway about this "new religion"? human solidarity in a multicultural and What does he think of Protestantism, multiethnic society. Catholicism, Islam?

8. Discuss Hemingway's treatment of land1. How can True at First Light be under-scape and sense of place. Why does he stood as "fiction"? If the characters are feel so attached to and moved by the real people, if the events really took African landscape? What is the imporplace, where does the creative imagina-tance of Mount Kilimanjaro in this tion enter into the process? landscape?

2. Do some background reading and dis-9. Discuss aspects of Hemingway's style cussion, e.g., one or more of the works and technique: a) identify the quotathat influenced Hemingway in writing tions he employs in the text; b) learn about Africa (see Literary Precedents). something about the authors and the Compare and contrast the way other works. to which Hemingway alludes authors treated similar matters: the Afri- and tell how such extratextual knowlcan landscape, the legacy of colonial-edge deepens understanding of the pasism, black-white relationships, etc. sage in which the allusion occurs; c) analyze some element of his style— 3. Compare and contrast Hemingway's syntax, sentence rhythm, repetition, treatment of Africa and Africans in his metaphor, dialogue, etc.—and describe other works dealing with Africa (see its effect.

Related Titles).

10. Learn some facts about Hemingway's 4. Why does Hemingway love and ad-life, especially as he lived it in Africa.

mire Pop (Philip Percival)? List Pop's Compare and contrast his actual life attributes, the specific values he em-with the depicted life of the book's narrator. What conclusions do you draw regarding the relationship between autobiographical fact and fiction?

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