Flashbacks and the Trials of Hemingway’s War Veterans

Healing in the Natural World

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In a war, the landscape loses. War is a disruption of nature. Fought within a specific setting, war affects an ecosystem. It also affects those who fight in it. In this essay, we will look at how we might help students to focus on the inner landscape of war that one finds inside the minds of Ernest Hemingway’s characters. Hemingway characters, upon returning home, often seek solace in nature for relief after the war. In the novel *A Farewell to Arms* and in the short stories “Soldier’s Home,” “Big Hearted River,” and “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” we see the effects of war upon characters and their interaction with the natural world. Hemingway implies the value of the outdoors for returning veterans and their process of healing and reengagement with civilian life.

This essay emerges from my own encounters with several veterans who are enrolled at the college where I teach. They are young men and women who are in situations similar to those of Hemingway’s characters. They are dedicated people who have returned home from war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and they have arrived at our college, one of the dozens of military friendly schools across America, to pursue new goals. This has raised some questions for us. Can teaching Hemingway stories help these individuals as they return to college after being overseas in the military? Might reading Hemingway with students in high school and college settings sensitize students to the stories of young men and women who have recently returned from service in Iraq or Afghanistan? What do Hemingway’s depictions of his characters in ecological settings have to do with the healing, renewal, and revival of a person who has known the landscape of war?
For Ernest Hemingway, war was where men lived fully. The image of war that the camera provides, he said, is clear and true because men going into action do not “act before the camera in the presence of death” (*Spanish Earth* 23). War is an existential condition, we might explain to our students. There is a heightening of ultimate concern, a crucial freedom, in the act of a soldier going into battle.

War is exciting, observes my colleague James Smith, a psychotherapist who has often worked with returning veterans. Smith points out: men with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), who served in Vietnam, have often chosen quiet places to reduce stimuli and have retreated to non-stimulating, rural environments. PTSD, in part, has to do with being keyed up, always on edge and on guard. So, former soldiers, who may be easily excited, may choose these quieter areas and natural settings to tamp down the stimulation. He points out that soldiers returning home have sometimes found home to be dull after the intensity of war. In “Soldier’s Home,” we see this in Harold Krebs’s dismissal of “settling down” and becoming “really a credit to the community” (151). As therapists Daryl S. Paulson and Stanley C. Krippner point out, “Some veterans feel like they have lost everything of value and suffer a total alienation from friends, lovers, family and themselves” (15). Frederic J. Svoboda, likewise, mentions that Vietnam veterans with whom he has spoken have found Krebs’s disillusioned homecoming “reflecting accurately their experiences” (170). The place that once was home seems too pedestrian and alienating.

Yet, veterans are often highly motivated students. Despite whatever distress they may be experiencing, they are determined to handle their assignments effectively. Their military training evidently suggests to them that the professor in a classroom ought to take charge. A sense of order in the surroundings seems to be quite important to them. They are often goal oriented, self-motivated, and disciplined. However, as was the case with Harold Krebs, they are readjusting to American society.

Considering this, we might encourage our students to think about their homes and the stories that they share with each other about their experiences. Students can make a chart of the various discourse communities in which they participate: who they speak with and what they talk about. A class lesson might be built around how well we listen to each other when we share our stories. Harold Krebs cannot easily tell his story to people in his community, who are by now tired of stories of war. When he tells someone about his experiences, he embellishes those experiences to get a reaction from people. Krebs wants to be heard, so he makes up stories. However, he soon finds that what has happened
to him in the war is distasteful. Whereas he once felt “cool and clear inside,” he now finds that valuable quality lost (111).

One of my students was clearly proud of his service. He wore a sweatshirt with lettering that indicated he had been a marine in Iraq. One of his classmates called him a hero. I could see the edginess, the effort, the determination in him, and he confided in me about the changes in his life and his marriage. He participated in the class, did his assignments, earned a good grade, and moved on to other classes. It was clear that he was hurting, like Hemingway’s Krebs, and yet, unlike Krebs, he had not given up and he was making his way. He never spoke much about what he had experienced overseas, but it was obvious that this was a special individual.

Narrative is important for Krebs, who needs to tell his story. Storytelling is also valuable for our communities and classrooms. Social recognition of the valuable things that people do on behalf of our communities and our nation is critical to the maintenance of individuals and our communities. Realizing the dedication of military service men and women, a town nearby our college has recognized recent veterans by draping signs with their names across a fence that faces a major traffic intersection. Their names are visible to those walking or driving by. These signs of recognition and appreciation provide reassurances from the community.

Howard Krebs’s situation is different from this. Upon returning from war, he goes unrecognized. His personal narrative is diminished, or distorted, because an audience does not hear his true voice. Krebs is bewildered. It is clear that he once liked the simplicity of a military life that focused on survival and fighting an enemy. In such wartime conditions, he was able to trust his instincts and his choices. However, life at home is less defined. Krebs cannot get on with the rest of life. He has experienced trauma. He has been present to too much violence and needs the healing space of a community. While he feels the need to talk about his wartime experience, he is unable to tell his story. The possibility of being listened to has vanished. Interest in the war has eroded with time, and the citizens of his hometown have already heard many war stories. Krebs has to make up stories in order to be listened to. He exaggerates. He incorporates the experiences of other soldiers into his own experiences. The narrator tells us that Krebs’s “lies were not sensational at the pool room” (112). True memories become lost. Krebs cannot talk through his memories. He is one of many who have these stories and society has become numb. Tired of these stories, people have stopped listening.
Hemingway is making a point about authenticity here. Krebs needs to become whole again, but he is struggling with being an authentic, truth-telling individual. What we see here in this portrayal of Krebs is that, rather than isolation, there is a need for a reintegration into society. Soldiers need jobs, social connections, and perhaps a college education.

Krebs’s mother tells him that his father thinks he has lost his ambition in life. The other people his age are all “settling down” and getting married. Charley Simmons and these others are going to be “a credit to the community,” she says (115). Within his mother’s comments, Krebs hears criticism. It all seems to say: “so, what is the matter with you?”

It seems that Krebs may need a space apart, like other Hemingway characters. A natural setting would act as a counter for the alienation that Krebs is experiencing. For example, in *Snows of Kilimanjaro*, Harry seeks a zone that is natural and apart, distant and exotic. Nature surrounds Harry, as a grand snow leopard is defined high on a hill against the sky. Likewise, in “Big Hearted River,” a story in the collection titled *In Our Time*, Nick Adams, seeks a place away: the peacefulness of a lake, where he can go fishing. There, in a quiet landscape, he finds serene simplicity that is set in contrast with his memories—likely those of a bitterly fought war. Students may find that he wrestles a bit with those memories when he wrestles with a fish on the end of his line.

The natural world is ever a factor in Hemingway’s *In Our Time* collection. The presence of Nick Adams weaves through these stories, and World War I, often understated, lingers in the background. There are eleven stories in *In Our Time*, which feature a young male protagonist. He is on “an odyssey of revelation and self-discovery,” Wirt Williams points out (33). Four stories fall outside this pattern. In seven stories, the young man is Nick Adams. In “Soldiers Home,” we see Krebs. In “Cat in the Rain,” we meet George. In “Out of Season” and “A Very Short Story,” the young male protagonist is never named. Carlos Baker suggests that these all could have been about “Nick,” except for the names given to the characters. Having experienced the violence of war, the absurdity of loss, he goes back to the woods in Michigan. He finds renewal in “Big Two Hearted River.” Williams calls this “reunion with the life force” (37). Hemingway’s presentation of Nick’s relationship with nature in “Big Two-Hearted River” suggests the psychological reasons that people are drawn to spend time in the natural world.

“He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him” (“Big Two Hearted River” 164). For Nick, the tent seems “homelike” and he is “settled.” To be fishing in this quiet place
is simply to be. “He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it” (167). This happiness is interrupted as he does battle with a fish. In this trout battle, he feels “a little sick, as though it would be better to sit down” (169). He looks forward to “plenty of days” when he can go fishing (177).

Students might think about how we make our homes and how this home of ours relates to the natural world. A tent is a temporary residence—an almost permeable dwelling that is placed within nature by campers. Within it, one is close to the land, while shielded from rain or the cool night air. For a time, it is home. And so it is for Nick, who leaves the world behind. The home (oikos) of each student may feel a bit more permanent than this. Even so, that home is within a system of relations, in a specific setting and ecosystem.

Short of taking your class outdoors, you might ask your students to jot down some of their positive experiences of the natural world. After they have read Hemingway’s story, you can collect their ideas, having students drop their papers into a bowl or a small box. Then have them go “fishing,” drawing from those ideas for a discussion.

You might ask the questions that Kenneth S. Lynn asks: What needs does Nick have to put behind him? Why does he refer to his tent as a home? Why does the episode of battling the fish make him feel sick? (150).

My own answer to Nick’s “sick” feeling is that PTSD affects him in this moment of stress as he grapples with the fish. On some level, the sudden jarring battle with the fish elicits those old memories. Lynn relates the story to Hemingway’s own biographical context. He points to both the writer’s home and his mother as being more decisive than his war experience. I stand with Edmund Wilson’s view, however, that this touch of panic is part of the war-torn veteran’s experience of memories within the present moment.

Nick, in my view, is a veteran suffering from PTSD, who goes to nature for relief from malaise. It is true, as Lynn points out, that “not a single reference to war appears in the story” (151). This critic extends the trauma to the home-life of the character. One might ask if Nick is not in the same existential situation as Krebs in “Soldier’s Home.”

Malcolm Cowley in his introduction to The Portable Hemingway spoke of a lost generation and insisted that war had shattered their relation to the country of their boyhoods. In Hemingway’s story, the implication is that Nick is a war veteran trying to move beyond his emotional wounds. Mark Schorer wrote of Hemingway, “Nothing more important than this wounding was ever to happen to him” (675). The outdoors becomes a space where healing this wound is possible. In this existential condition, the natural world is where one meets
with “being,” to use the philosopher Martin Heidegger’s focus. This is where a person may become aware of a basic connection with life. Hemingway, of course, never says this. Least of all does he ever quote existential philosophers. Yet it is clear that characters like Harry in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” and Nick Adams are pursuing something true and fundamental in their encounters with the natural world.

Hemingway draws our attention to the phenomenological. He meets the world of objects and the natural setting with a steady gaze. We see Nick viewing the hillside and the river. With him we look down into the water and we see the trout that Nick watches for a long time. Hemingway’s writing acts as a way of observation, as a connection of words with careful attention to objects. The author’s recreations of landscapes are like series of pictures by Cézanne. In Hemingway’s writing, spatial representations are carefully constructed in language. For example, in The Sun Also Rises Hemingway encourages readers to see a truck as it moves from the foreground to the hills in the background.

Hemingway’s practice of attentiveness to the natural world may have been developed early on in the writer’s life. One may recall that Hemingway’s father, Clarence Hemingway, was a physician and an amateur naturalist. Dr. Hemingway organized Ernest’s eighth-grade class into a club named after Louis Agassiz. They took nature walks along the Des Plaines River. Dr. Hemingway was involved with the Oak Park Third Congregational Church, where he taught a Sunday school class. The scientific orientation of his work as a physician and his interest in naturalist studies developed skills of observation in his son. Susan F. Beegel points out that Ernest Hemingway’s father may have “hoped that the habits of an observant natural historian would increase his son’s reverence for divine creation” but that his father’s nature walks actually “helped him to achieve ultimate disillusion with God” (75). In 1919, Hemingway made a fishing trip to Seney in the Michigan woods about fifteen miles south of Lake Superior at the Big Fox and Little Fox Rivers. He was “trying to do the country like Cezanne” he told Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas on 15 August 1924 (A Moveable Feast 30).

Hemingway’s stories can remind students of how to really “see” the world around them, particularly the natural world that is sometimes taken for granted. You might ask them to identify and describe specific sites in the environment near your school. Hemingway has a keen eye for natural phenomena. Students can, likewise, better develop their own awareness. In a few well-chosen details, Hemingway is able to clearly render a landscape, so that we too can “see” it.
Students can be asked to engage in close readings of passages in his texts that offer this careful scrutiny and guide the eye.

“Let no man be ashamed to kneel here in the great outdoors,” says Bill Gorton in *The Sun Also Rises* (122). Frederic Henry escapes from war as he dives into the Tagliamento River in a baptism of the natural world. Susan F. Beegel implies that this fact is connected with nature’s healing (55). She points out that “Hemingway learned to describe the natural world with a scientist’s unwavering gaze, respect for truth, interest in detail, and objective language” (54). She reminds us of how Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) escape war into the mountains of Switzerland and Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) fishes in the streams of Spain after the Great War (55).

*A Farewell to Arms* begins with a transposition of nature into human warfare. The flashes of guns are “like summer lightning” (11). The land is turned to the purpose of camouflage: barrels of the guns are covered with green branches, as are the tractors. Small gray motor cars racing through the scene splash mud. War possesses the landscape: “The mountain that was beyond the valley and the hillside where the chestnut forest grew was captured” (5). Past the town, the forest oak trees on the mountain are gone: “The forest had been green in the summer when we had come into the town but now there were the stumps and the broken trunks and the ground torn up” (6). If one looks along the line of the river, “none of the mountains beyond the river had been taken” (8). The landscape is surrounded by guns: “There were many more guns in the country around and the spring had come” (9) begins chapter three. “The fields were green and there were small green shoots on the vines, the trees along the road had small leaves and a breeze came from the sea . . . In the town there were more guns” (9). “The battery in the next garden woke me” (13) begins chapter four. In chapter five the contact with Catherine and Frederic Henry begins in a garden: “It was really very large and beautiful and there were fine trees in the grounds. Miss Barkley was sitting on a bench in the garden” (16).

*For Whom the Bell Tolls* also underscores human relationship with the natural world. Robert Martin writes: “Through abundant, actually pervasive and detailed descriptions of nature, especially of the pine trees, Hemingway suggests that man is not merely an interloper or casual observer of nature, but rather, he is an integral part of the wild, an active participant. He must, therefore, if he is to grow and mature, be not only a participant in nature, but also a pupil of it as well” (56). Wartime technology—tanks, planes, machine guns—also speaks of the human relationship with nature. The original meaning
of the Greek word *techne*, from which our word *technology* derives, meant “to make.” However, the sense of this word is that of practicing a craft—one like Hemingway’s own disciplined art of writing. Writing has order and structures. For Hemingway, writing was integral. Like the patient act of fishing by his character Nick Adams, writing was closely connected with a disciplined self and with the earth.

Hemingway’s characters seek peace and distance from the stimulation of busy environments. Nature, rather than the hospital, is the healing place. Gerry Brenner writes, “Unlike Sinclair Lewis’s hospitals, or Thomas Mann’s sanatorium, which completes the education of his hero in *Magic Mountain*, Hemingway’s hospitals cannot heal the deeper injuries common to the human condition” (131). What can give humankind healing and a sense of order is the natural world. This is so amid “life’s utter irrationality” (132). Nature itself, of course, is not controllable and predictable. Nature presents structures of beauty and a placid setting. It may also suggest design. However, nature is not rational and nature may be quite impersonal. At the end of *A Farewell to Arms*, Catherine will not fulfill the cycle of reproduction. Rain will fall inconsolably. Frederic Henry is disoriented: a character filled with unanswered questions, as Brenner observes (137). This disorientation in his retrospective narration emerges from his PTSD. “I tried to tell about the night and the difference between the night and the day and how the night was better unless the day was very clean and cold and I could not tell it, and I cannot tell it now” (*Farewell to Arms* 13). Indeed, he does “compel empathy” and he is “one of us,” as Brenner says (138).

Frederic Henry wants to pin the world down in concrete language and he rejects abstract terms. Critics have often looked at Hemingway’s use of the rain, the death in childbirth, and the crafted and often rewritten conclusion of *A Farewell to Arms*. Less attention has been given to the natural world and its disruption. This is so, despite the obvious relationship between the tortured landscape, the waste of war, and Catherine’s death that Lionel Trilling called the book’s genre tragedy. Yet, even as Trilling is correct in observing how man endures in the face of inhuman circumstances, that man also escapes to nature. Millicent Bell observes that years afterward Henry cannot get rid of the debility and morbidity. Yet, Hemingway characters invariably drift toward settings in the natural world, as if something within them has suggested this.

“The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” published in 1936, has a subtext about vitality and meaning. Harry is trying to reaffirm his life on a safari. We read of Harry that “he had sold vitality, in one form or another, all his life and when your affections are not too involved you give much better value for the money. He
had found that out but he would never write that, now, either. No, he would not write that, although it was well worth writing” (45). Harry has sold his vitality throughout his life. Being a soldier, or a writer, involves the selling of vitality. Yet, the life force is in nature. Having sold out his vitality, he seems to be attempting to find it again in the natural world.

Of course, Harry is not well, despite being surrounded by all of this vitality. Gangrene has set into his injured leg. Memories return as Harry reflects on death: “Now he would never write the things that he had saved to write until he knew enough to write them well. Well, he would not have to fail at trying to write them either. Maybe you could never write them, and that was why you put them off and delayed the starting” (41).

The epigraph to this story reads: “Kilimanjaro is a snow-covered mountain 19,710 feet high, and is said to be the highest mountain in Africa. Its western summit is called the Masai ‘Ngâje Ngâi,’ the House of God. Close to the western summit there is the dried and frozen carcass of a leopard. No one has explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude” (39).

One may also ask what the man was seeking. Hemingway’s famous code of “grace under pressure” responds to the question of how to live with dignity. Harry represents the man who faces a not entirely hospitable nature. Rather, he lives in an indifferent world marked by violence in which the life of the individual lacks intrinsic meaning. Harry questions his past and struggles with his sense of the meaninglessness of life. At one point, Harry reveals that “for years [death] had obsessed him; but now it meant nothing in itself. It was strange how easy being tired enough made it” (41). Harry spent years of life obsessed with death. He says of death that “now it meant nothing in itself.” Death stalks Harry; it is personified, given shape and form (54).

In “The Snow of Kilimanjaro,” Hemingway’s use of italics offers us Harry’s state of mind. We see his reality and we see his imagination. Harry’s flashbacks, or memories—events that are occurring only in Harry’s mind—are set in italics and the main part of the story is set in standard roman type. One might ask students what they make of this. Does the story say anything about memories and how they are significant in the present?

Psychologists who work with veterans with PTSD point out that “flashbacks indicate the psyche’s attempt to heal at the core level” (Tick 215). Harold Krebs, in a spiritual desert, might find meaning in such a place. The fishing that Nick Adams does may be a calming and focusing ritual. Inviting a veteran to participate in a formal ritual, like an Inipi, or sweat lodge, is not a casual step, observes Edward Tick. However, a homelier pastime, like the ritual of fishing,
might help inspire a sense of calm and introspection. Natural environments are settings that may elicit memories, or meditations—gentle or profound. Nick Adams gazes into the cool waters of a lake. Harry gazes to the mountain. Perhaps, in a safe and natural environment, the recognition of meaning, or healing and renewal, may be possible.

Sharing the stories of Hemingway in classroom settings suggests that men and women who have served in the military may see their own experience reflected in these fictional designs. Reading Hemingway does, in fact, enhance students’ appreciation and understanding of the experiences of returning veterans. It also is a way of bringing attention to the potentially restorative effects of spending time in contact with the natural world. Hemingway’s portrayal of his characters in natural settings suggests that there are environments where an individual’s resources may be refreshed, re-gathered, and restored.

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