

LOOKING AT THE PAST:
NOSTALGIA AS TECHNIQUE IN
THE NAKED AND THE DEAD AND
FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

B O B B A T C H E L O R

“A great writer always goes to the root, he is always coming up with the contradictions, the impasses, the insoluble dilemmas of the particular time he lives in. The result is not to cement society but to question it and destroy it” (qtd. in Breit 20). —Norman Mailer

NOSTALGIA IS A CONTESTED WORD THAT EVOKES numerous, often conflicting, definitions depending on its context. In contemporary usage, however, the term most often implies a romantic look at the past, as if history’s difficulties have been bleached out of existence. Through nostalgia, people can make sense of the past in a highly personal way, essentially crafting or re-creating narratives that fit into their broader ideas about self and society. The tendency, however, is to consider this use simpleminded.

What I call the “nostalgic attraction” or the desire to examine the past through rose-colored lenses has become a vital component of popular culture. The general craving for nostalgia has transformed the idea into a commodity, used to advertise, market, and sell products by invoking a return to “the good ole’ days.” The nostalgic idea also drives mass culture. There are numerous examples of nostalgia assuming a kind of starring role across mediums, from blockbuster films, such as *Forrest Gump* or *Titanic*, to popular television shows, music, books, and fashion. Nostalgia is also closely

associated with certain presidents, such as Ronald Reagan, or with presidential eras, like John F. Kennedy's Camelot.

Much of nostalgia's allure is in providing people with a way to explain the past in favorable terms, a kind of self-persuasion or possibly even delusion. According to Linda Charnes, "we cannot, nor would we want to, abandon the important project of understanding how people lived in times before ours—what they experienced in their own cultural present" (73). She contends, however, that scholars also need to "acknowledge the inherent limitations of the cognitive framework that continues to organize our ideological relationship to time" (73). Since life unfolds in chronological terms, taking measure of past milestones or events seems logical. Yet, when given a fanciful spin, nostalgia is less history and more fairytale.

Despite the overriding negativity surrounding nostalgia—basically that it strips history of its complexities and enables individuals and society to yearn for a mythical past—a careful examination uncovers a different approach to looking at the past. From this alternative perspective, nostalgia can be interpreted as a positive force. Or, as Christine Sprengler explains, "[nostalgia] tells us something about our own historical consciousness, about the myths we construct and circulate and about our desire to make history meaningful on a personal and collective level" (3). Rather than simply brushing it off as a form of camp or romanticism, I argue that nostalgia is a central component in enabling individuals to create worldviews, while also discovering ways to maneuver within society. Nostalgia, then, can enlighten and provide nuance as one interprets the past.

In this essay, I focus on how Norman Mailer and Ernest Hemingway use nostalgia in *The Naked and the Dead* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* as a literary technique. In each, nostalgia is deliberately invoked as a means to help the reader understand or contextualize the narrative. As a result, nostalgia fills in chronological gaps in the texts, thus pulling readers deeper into the storylines. Hemingway and Mailer are also able to use nostalgia to interpret broader societal issues.

It may be challenging to break from the common notion of interpreting nostalgia as a silly distraction, particularly in contrast to the more difficult work in understanding the authentic past. Yet, what Mailer and Hemingway demonstrate is that nostalgia can be used, even with a touch of sentimentality, to add additional interpretive layers to fiction. Taking nostalgia

seriously, the authors expand on the term and demonstrate its potential in advancing historical insight.

MAILER ENTERS "THE TIME MACHINE"

Boldly declared, "the best novel yet about World War II," by *Time* magazine, *The Naked and the Dead* launched Mailer's career ("War"). At twenty-five, the author stood atop the literary world, with fame and wealth at his side. The enduring power of the book, however, is its exploration beyond the traditional scope of the war novel. Rather than cast the battle as simply one of good versus evil, Mailer penetrates deeply into issues at humanity's core. He showcases both the horror and humor of war, wadding it into a single existential romp through the jungles of tiny Pacific island Anopopei.

One of the interesting techniques Mailer uses in exploring the lives of the men fighting on the island is a device he calls "The Time Machine," which takes the reader to events in the men's lives prior to their service. While *Time* offhandedly labeled these simply "flashbacks" and likened them to John Dos Passos' use of realistic snapshots in the U.S.A. trilogy, Mailer's portraits are not toss-off pieces, but instead provide information central to the overall tone and interpretation of the novel ("War").

In the ten stories that comprise *The Time Machine*, Mailer offers the reader detail regarding each subject's life before the Army, essentially establishing a link between the person's past and present. Many of them reveal the men at their most base—actors operating within the gritty drama of life. From this viewpoint, *The Time Machine* pieces point toward Mailer's predecessors in American naturalism, such as Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris. However, there is a nostalgic strain that runs through them as well. The combination of realism and nostalgia displays the young author's skill in storytelling and purposely crafting an impression for the reader, as if hinting toward a nostalgic past within the naturalistic framework is a way of lessening the violence and disparity in these sections.

For example, Mailer shows Red Valsen's duality, almost lovingly describing him as having "an expression of concentrated contempt" and "tired eyes, a rather painful blue . . . quiet" (222). With deft writing, Mailer also creates the suffocating Montana mines of the man's youth, as well as the open road he craves, with the unnamed narrator explaining, "To a kid from a mining town, getting drunk in a flatcar on Saturday night is still fun. The horizon extends for a million miles over the silver cornfields" (226). Without resorting

to the fake sentimentality that marks the contemporary definition of nostalgia, Mailer uses the great American myth/nostalgic view of the open road as a tool to elicit a specific feeling from the reader. His style—the “silver corn-fields”—acts as an additional character as the reader travels through Valsen’s remembered past.

Mailer certainly understood the realist aspects of *The Time Machine* essays and *The Naked and the Dead* as a whole. But to consider them nothing more than simple reportage, or “massive amounts of research, seemingly assembled rather than written . . . in a crude unexpanded note form,” as Nigel Leigh describes them, is a terrible injustice to the part they play in clarifying each man’s past and adding context to the group’s role in the attack on Anopopei (427). Three years after publishing the novel, Mailer told *The New York Times* that he respected, but felt hamstrung, by “that terrible word naturalism” (Breit 20). Obviously, for the author, there was more at stake with *The Time Machine* pieces than simply pushing a political or ideological agenda.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given Mailer’s years at Harvard, Robert Hearn’s *Time Machine* section, titled “The Addled Womb,” is the deepest exploration. In this piece, Mailer allows Hearn to use his past as a springboard in becoming a different person. At first, Hearn looks back on his past with nostalgic feelings, despite his difficult relationship with his bullying father and passive mother. During college though, the young man goes through a transformation. He emerges wiser in many ways, but lost. He tells one girlfriend, “I don’t feel sick. I just feel blank . . . superior, I don’t give a damn, I’m just waiting around” (349). Hearn becomes so enmeshed in the sensitivities of the world that he himself disappears in the process.

At the end of the Hearn section, the man sets off on a troop transport from San Francisco and looks back at the city lights. Hearn’s mind drifts to a nostalgic vision of the past, to his time as a younger man when the future still looked promising, “the power that leaped at you, invited you” (353). But, when examining his generation, he concedes “all the bright young people of his youth had butted their heads, smashed against things until they got weaker and the things still stood” (353). A scion of the Midwest with unlimited resources, he is nonetheless beaten. In his defeat, he becomes part of the institution that he flailed against.

AUTHENTICITY VERSUS NOSTALGIA IN HEMINGWAY

For Whom the Bell Tolls, Hemingway's tale of guerrilla warfare in the Spanish mountains as seen through the eyes of American professor Robert Jordan, according to Michael K. Solow, "can be read as an indictment of war, corrupt politics, and flawed humanity" (116). The novel is also a study in details, as Jordan lives among Pablo's bandits, falls in love with Maria/Rabbit, and prepares to blow up the bridge, which he concedes is a suicide mission.

Yet, within the stark description of life in the jungle and Jordan's last several days leading up to the explosion, Hemingway also uses nostalgia as a means of providing context and explanation for Jordan's decision to sacrifice himself and his guerrilla colleagues. Nostalgia in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is a necessary component in making this sacrifice have meaning. Particularly, Solow explains, when "[c]ontemporary readers also knew too well that the Spanish Civil War had been lost for over a year when the novel appeared in 1940. So, in a larger sense, the actual outcome of Jordan's mission—from a *rational* perspective—is altogether moot" (116). Hemingway uses Jordan's nostalgic feelings for Spain prior to the war as a motivation for his actions in the novel.

Robert Jordan fights the fascists because he believes in the pre-Civil War Spain he loves. His worldview includes this nostalgic aspect, which he holds simultaneously with an analytical understanding of his current situation. As an intellectual, he holds an acute, fact-based, and logical worldview. Jordan also sees the larger strategic picture, even on his last day, boosting his own morale by thinking "as long as we can hold them here we keep the fascists tied up. They can't attack any other country until they finish with us." But, then admitting, "You just watch now and do what you should" and chastising himself for "getting very pompous in the early morning" (465). Given that the reader knows the Spanish Civil War was lost, Hemingway needed to convince them that Jordan fought for something important.

The contrast between Jordan the thinker and Jordan the dreamer that Hemingway creates really expands and deepens the reader's interpretation of the character. Early in the novel, the reader watches as Jordan sketches the bridge in his ever-present notebook, a kind of lifeline he clings to throughout the story. Thus, one reads, "He sketched quickly and happily; glad at last to have the problem under his hand; glad at last actually to be engaged upon it," and recognizes the orderly, rational side of Jordan that puts him on this task, despite the risk.

Hemingway, though, does not create Jordan as a kind of robot, without emotion or feeling, which may have been an easier route to take, given the complexity of detail the author provides throughout the novel. Instead, the young guerrilla warrior has a past and thoughts about his personal history that has consequences for his current beliefs and actions.

Jordan, for example, draws a distinction between the things he learns as an actor within the drama of war and the time he spent in Spain with its people for “parts of ten years before the war” (148). He is able to balance the atrocities he participates in with the loving feelings as an outsider, but who had put in the time to learn the nation and its people to the point, “He never felt like a foreigner in Spanish and they did not really treat him like a foreigner most of the time” (148). In the end, Jordan decides he will take in everything, convincing himself “if he were going to form judgments he would form them afterwards” (148). Yet, it is difficult to think that he could divorce himself from ten years of previous experiences in Spain or his love for the nation.

While Jordan holds both a rational side and a nostalgic vision of the past, Pilar presents a kind of anti-nostalgia in telling the story of the massacre at Avila. Although, even then, Pilar drapes the story in positive images of the past, when she was beautiful and young and Pablo was a strong, forceful leader. Hemingway emphasizes the importance of the speech by couching it in terms of a lecture, “as though she were speaking to a classroom,” the narrator explains (108). Jordan, on the other hand, places a nostalgic sheen on the event.

Later, when Jordan reflects on Pilar’s story, he hopes that he can someday write about the episode as well as she told it. His desire to get at “[w]hat we did. Not what the others did to us” (147), points to balance Hemingway creates between the authentic history of the Spanish Civil War, which will be ultimately told by the winners, and the people of Spain: “You had to have known the people before. You had to know what they had been in the village” (147). The tension between authenticity and nostalgia creates a new way of looking at a world event witnessed by Hemingway and written about shortly after its end. With *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway forced his readers, just as Pilar forced Jordan, to confess “that damned woman made me see it as though I had been there” (147). The reader must address the relationship between authenticity and nostalgia, which Hemingway presents without

overt sentimentality, giving nostalgia a prime place in how Jordan creates his powerful worldview.

NOSTALGIA AS A LITERARY TECHNIQUE

The contemporary negative attributes of nostalgia as mere sentimentality or as a tool to sell products hides its effectiveness as a legitimate way of addressing the past, particularly in literature. In other words, nostalgia does not have to be automatically linked to an unrealistic or fanciful yearning for a romanticized past. As a matter of fact, as Michael Janover explains, “Nostalgia is the pain of homesickness,” which could be turned into a positive as an author creates characters that have thoughts and feelings about their own history. His interpretation of “nostalgias,” defined as “the pangs of longing for another time, another place, another self . . . almost certainly romantic in seed and, potentially, corrosively decadent in growth” (115) can also be transformed into a useful device for creating literary figures.

Given that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Naked and the Dead* were published a mere eight years apart, the use of nostalgia within the narratives and as a literary technique speaks to the role of nostalgia in that era dominated by war, its consequences, and immediate aftermath. As Sprengler notes, the interpretation of nostalgia had gone through a transformation in the early years of the twentieth century, “within modernity because of industrialization, technological modernization and urbanization” (16). Leigh, for example, then views *The Time Machine* sections of Mailer’s novel as fixing the characters “unalterably to their environments . . . to a reality that is shown to be static and unchanging” (427). Looking into the past, then, for some guidance or grounding within the current environment would provide solace for people going through tremendous change, whether it is for the authors, the characters they create, or for their readers.

There remains a fine line between an authentic representation of the past and a nostalgic view. For Hemingway and Mailer, the use of nostalgia in war novels certainly softens the harshness of the place their characters exist in current time. As Charnes notes, “As physical creatures who are born, grow, age, and die, our experience of time convinces us that it moves in only one direction: forward. [But] As creatures with highly developed cognition and memory, however, our experience of time is vastly more complicated” (74–75). Breaking out of the chronological view also adds density to the narratives, by revealing that time is a complex experience. For both Hemingway

and Mailer, providing a multi-dimensional view of a character's past that includes nostalgic impulses, creates richer characters, ones that readers, in turn, empathize with as they struggle through the atrocities of warfare.

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