



Keys to Hemingway

Ernest Lockridge

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A Guided Tour Things may not be immediately discernible in what Hemingway writes in part because he seems so transparent. Where other twentieth-century "greats" can be exasperatingly opaque, Hemingway is a sheer pleasure to read. The prose is crisp, clear and exciting. Hemingway is user-friendly out of the box, no manual required to read and enjoy *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*. His finely spun, deliberate masterpieces read easily. Hemingway is elusive because 1) he disarms the reader by seeming so plain and simple, and 2) he deliberately omits "things, for example, "I omitted the real end of [a very simple story called "Out of Season"] which was that the old man hanged himself. This was omitted on my theory that you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and 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." This grants the reader more than a mere hunting license for the meaning underlying Hemingway's writing, it constitutes a direct order. Hemingway criticism has long-since filled the void, so to speak, with elaborate symbolism—a literary convention that Hemingway, himself, eschewed as utterly foreign to his artistic method and design: "Carlos Baker"—prominent literary critic, and a biographer of Hemingway—"really baffles me," wrote Hemingway. "Do you suppose he can con himself into thinking I would put a symbol into anything on purpose? It's hard enough just to make a paragraph." Hemingway jettisoned symbolism as an antiquated literary convention that gets in the way of depicting life as it is. For Hemingway is "trying . . . to get the feeling of the actual life across—not to just depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive. So that when you have read something by me you actually experience the thing." A further reason "things may not be immediately discernible in what [Hemingway] writes" is his technique of indirection and irony, which as a result demands a considerable effort from the reader. "I know how damned much I try always to do the thing by three cushion shots rather than by . . . direct statement. *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms* and *Green Hills of Africa* provide a Harvard-Classics-Bookshelf's worth of incomparably brilliant trick shots. Hemingway broadly hints at how he must be approached by anyone wishing to "discern" "things," and provides us with a couple of specific examples as guidelines: 1) the "true" ending of "Out of Season" (above) and 2) this, about his long short story "Big Two-Hearted River": "Well, I thought, now I have them so they do not understand them. There cannot be much doubt about that. But they will understand the same way that they always do in painting . . . I sat in a corner with the afternoon light coming in over my shoulder and wrote in the notebook . . . The story was about coming back from the war but there was no mention of the war in it." Hemingway also teaches us that "it is very bad for a writer to talk about how he writes. He writes to be read by the eye and no explanations or dissertations should be necessary. You can be sure that there is much more there than will be read at any first reading and having made this it is not the writer's province to explain it or to run guided tours through the more difficult country of his work." The "guided tour" is the province of this book.

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