Teaching Hemingway and Modernism

Joseph Fruscione

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TEACHING HEMINGWAY
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Teaching Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*
EDITED BY PETER L. HAYS

Teaching Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*
EDITED BY LISA TYLER

Teaching Hemingway and Modernism
EDITED BY JOSEPH FRUSCIONE
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Foreword

Mark P. Ott

How should the work of Ernest Hemingway be taught in the twenty-first century? Although the “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s have faded, Hemingway’s place in the curriculum continues to inspire discussion among writers and scholars about the lasting value of his work. To readers of this volume, his life and writing remain vital, meaningful, and culturally resonant for today’s students.

Books in the Teaching Hemingway Series build on the excellent work of founding series editor Susan F. Beegel, who guided into publication the first two volumes of this series, *Teaching Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms*, edited by Lisa Tyler (2008), and *Teaching Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises*, edited by Peter L. Hays (2008). To promote their usefulness to instructors and professors—from high schools, community colleges, and universities—the newest volumes in this series are organized thematically, rather than around a single text. This shift attempts to open up Hemingway’s work to more interdisciplinary strategies of instruction through divergent theories, fresh juxtapositions, and ethical inquiries, and to the employment of emergent technology to explore media beyond the text.

*Teaching Hemingway and Modernism*, edited by Joseph Fruscione, speaks to issues that remain of intense interest to students and scholars today: the avant-garde, Paris, politics, war, race, and trauma. The expertise and insight Fruscione brought to his definitive work, *Faulkner and Hemingway: Biography of a Literary Rivalry* (2012), is manifest throughout this volume. These far-ranging essays explore Hemingway’s biography, his experience in Paris, the role of the Great War, and the implications that all these intersections had for the shaping and evolution of American modernism. This volume demonstrates that in today’s classrooms and lectures halls Hemingway’s work is being taught in more thoughtful and innovative ways than ever before. Indeed, the essays showcase the creativity, wisdom, and insight of authors from varied backgrounds united in their passion for sharing Hemingway’s work with a new generation of students.
Before we were teachers of Hemingway, we were students of Hemingway. Before we began defining modernism for our students, we were taught a set of terms, concepts, and exemplars that help articulate what modernism is—or, perhaps, more accurately, what modernisms are. I intend for this collection to guide students and teacher-scholars in (re)defining what Hemingway and modernism(s) continue to mean, both individually and jointly.

Just as, in Rita Barnard’s words, “[n]o one cause or project can be singled out as the defining feature of this diverse body of writing” (39), so too no one Hemingway text or theme can capture his multifaceted engagement with modernism in the postwar era. My goal for Teaching Hemingway and Modernism is to offer concrete, intertextual models for effectively using Hemingway’s work in various classroom settings, so students can understand the pertinent works, definitions, and types of avant-gardism that inflected his art. I aim for this volume to advance an intertextual–contextual approach to teaching Hemingway’s work in light of evolving theories and constructions of modernism, instead of a more traditional single-author or single-text approach. When soliciting essays for this collection in the summer and fall of 2012, I encouraged multiauthor, context-based approaches to Hemingway and modernism—specifically, approaches that balanced a focused, individual treatment of Hemingway’s work(s) with a clear link to the era and a clear set of assignments, prompts, and other teaching tools. Since Hemingway worked in dialogue with authors, artists, and larger literary and political movements in the postwar scene, models for teaching his work in its modernist context
should not only discuss but also practice this author–milieu dialogue. In this way, I’m seeking to operate within yet expand on the fine work my predecessors Peter Hays and Lisa Tyler have done, respectively, in *Teaching Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises* (2007) and *Teaching Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms* (2008).

I have chosen teacher-scholars from various levels of their careers who will discuss their ways of teaching Hemingway’s connections to such authors as Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, William Faulkner, Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thornton Wilder, Zora Neale Hurston, and George Orwell. This multiauthor approach is, I hope, both critically engaging and pedagogically applicable to teachers at various levels of secondary and university education. Teaching students ways of researching and evaluating information critically—from both born-print and born-digital sources—is a key step in teaching them to think and write critically. Readers can expect to find, among various interpretive approaches to Hemingway’s modernist-era work, a series of writing, discussion, and research-based tasks for different kinds of students.

My central goal is for this collection to strengthen yet complicate Hemingway’s position as a modernist—and perhaps as a proto-postmodernist, as Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera posits in chapter 14—while moving beyond established narratives of the “lost generation” and the like. The book’s fifteen contributors address a variety of critically significant questions, among them:

- How can we view and then teach Hemingway’s work along a spectrum of modernist avant-gardism?
- How can we teach his stylistic minimalism both on its own and in conjunction with the more expansive styles of Joyce, Faulkner, Woolf, and other modernists?
- What is, or should be, Hemingway’s place in evolving critical conversations about Anglophone modernism? What is new about Hemingway and/in modernism?
- How can we see the influence of Stein, Pound, and others on Hemingway in terms of dialogue and shared exchange, rather than simply a mentor-mentee relationship?
- What is postmodernist about an author so often discussed exclusively as a modernist, and how might we teach Hemingway’s work vis-à-vis that of contemporary authors?
- How can teacher-scholars bridge twentieth- and twenty-first-century pedagogies for Hemingway studies and American literary studies in high
school, undergraduate, and/or graduate settings? What role, if any, should new media play in the classroom?

Although much less broadly, I intend *Teaching Hemingway and Modernism* to work within the kinds of interdisciplinary, multiartist constructs that Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz have advanced in their collection, *Bad Modernisms* (2006). “The new modernist studies,” they note persuasively, have “moved toward a pluralism or fusion of theoretical commitments, as well as a heightened attention to continuities and intersections across the boundaries of artistic media . . . and (especially) to the relationship between individual works of art and the larger cultures in which they emerged” (2). Furthermore, they add, “this direction resonates with developments occurring throughout the humanities in recent years, of course, but it seems to accrue particular influence in the orbit of modernism, because early twentieth-century writers were themselves so preoccupied with border crossings such as cosmopolitanism, synesthesia, racial masquerade, collage, and translation” (2). Hemingway’s work at various levels participates in this modernist project of engagement and exchange, for instance in the kinds of stylistic, structural, and gendered newness seen throughout *In Our Time* (1925). In these fifteen essays, I have encouraged a similar, though smaller-scale, “variousness of approach” (in Mao and Walkowitz’s terms [2]) in the hope of meaningfully situating Hemingway’s work in its modernist context for teacher-scholars and students at different levels.

“As we come to acknowledge the extraordinary compass of the work,” Michael Levenson comments in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (2011), “it’s likely that it will prove better to be a minimalist in our definitions of that conveniently limp term ‘Modernist’ and maximalist in our accounts of the diverse ‘modernizing’ works and movements, that are sometimes congruent with one another, and just as often opposed or even contradictory” (3). In Hemingway’s case, his diverse avant-gardism, in the 1920s and 1930s especially, may be said to require an equally varied set of teaching approaches. The kinds of concrete, student-centered pedagogies that these fifteen contributors offer here add successfully—and, one hopes, influentially—to ongoing critical conversations about Hemingway and/in the modernist moment and promise to enrich our teaching and scholarship.

A presiding, yet intellectually welcome, difficulty in arranging this collection was the challenge of working with literary modernism as a concept. My contributors and I are, of course, dealing with a plural, fluid, and debatable model;
that modernism is not simply a checklist of attributes or a singularly defined critical construct helps *Teaching Hemingway and Modernism* work within the “extraordinary compass” that Levenson and other scholars address. Seeing modernism as an expansive series of approaches and actions, as Levenson, Mao and Walkowitz, and others do, will help teachers at all levels successfully contextualize Hemingway’s work along a spectrum of avant-gardism. There’s no single, neat definition of modernism, just as there’s no single way to teach *In Our Time*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and other Hemingway works.

Situating Hemingway in his literary-social context vis-à-vis modernism also entails understanding his nuanced treatment of gender and sexual fluidity, among other cultural narratives. (For an even richer treatment of this issue, see Verna Kale’s forthcoming collection in this same series, *Teaching Hemingway and Gender.*) Seen in its gender-inflected modernist context, much of Hemingway’s work manifests what Janet Lyon has convincingly seen as “the complicated and shifting relations of among sexual difference, the identity and performance of gender, and the various practices and desires issuing from sexuality” in the era (227). At some level, the essays by Lauren Rule Maxwell, Katie Owens-Murphy, and Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick work within the narrative of modernist gender that Lyon explores. Both directly and symbolically, Hemingway experienced postwar “salon communities” as loci of “an unusual intersection of public discourses and interiority” and of the “various experiences of experimental art,” as Lyon has observed more broadly (236).

Moreover, as Rita Barnard notes, modernist authors—such as Hemingway, Stein, Faulkner, Hurston, Toomer, and others examined in this collection—embodied and explored various dialectics between changes and origins. In particular, many of “the creators of modernist literature were often men and women who had been born in small villages, but who pursued their careers in large industrial cities: they were people who lived in two distinct worlds simultaneously. Though fascinated by the new and absorbed in it in their daily lives, they were also constantly aware of the old: of residual modes of production that they themselves witnessed or participated in” (Barnard 53). Such dual newness and (at some level) nostalgia illuminate the tensions between experiment and tradition—stylistically, structurally, in terms of gender, and so on—in Hemingway’s work and in the larger modernist era. The essays here by Phillip Beard, James Carothers, Anna Lillios, and Margaret Wright-Cleveland illuminate this notion of modernists’ places and pasts. Moreover, understanding Hemingway and/in Europe—a relationship here explored by David Barnes, Bradley Bowers, Meg Gillette, and Adam McKee—deepens the transatlantic
connections between Hemingway’s native and adopted countries, as well as between the late Victorian and the modern. The Hemingway–Orwell pairing that Jean Jespersen Bartholomew offers likewise situates Hemingway transnationally in ways that stress the exchange and border crossings identified by Mao and Walkowitz, Lyon, and other modernist scholars. Much of our teaching of Hemingway, especially but not exclusively within the modernist moment, might rest within these various tensions and exchanges. Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera explores similar tensions and creativity by considering Hemingway as proto-postmodernist, specifically through the lens of “Homage to Switzerland” and contemporary notions of irony, disorientation, and narrative fluidity.

“It is worth speculating,” Barnard continues later in conjunction with *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), “that the popularity of Hemingway’s work might be tied to his attempt to salvage a certain masculine austerity (or moral solvency) in a world where the locus of value was rapidly shifting from the traditionally masculine sphere of production to the traditionally feminized sphere of consumption and leisure” (63). Sharon Hamilton and Andrew Fletcher present, in particular ways, a means of viewing Hemingway in his literary–cultural moment in terms of magazines, periodicals, correspondence, and reviews. Teaching Hemingway’s work and/as modernism through such approaches stresses that analyzing context, cultural narratives, and various period texts can get students beyond the basic plot—that is to say, from asking “what happens” to asking “why something happens” or “what else is happening,” approaches that can meaningfully improve critical reading, writing, and researching of author and era.

I have divided the fifteen essays comprising *Teaching Hemingway and Modernism* thematically into the people, places, and politics underpinning Hemingway’s writing and milieu. As might be expected, discussions of *In Our Time* and *The Sun Also Rises* are prominent in this collection. Yet many other Hemingway works—such as the “Paris 1922” sketches that Adam McKee discusses in chapter 7, or *To Have and Have Not*, which Phillip Beard discusses in chapter 3—are also explored, revealing his experiments with, contributions to, and deepening of Anglophone modernism.

The first five chapters concentrate on the key people in Hemingway’s professional and creative life. Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick’s essay, “Modernist Style, Identity Politics, and Trauma in Hemingway’s ‘Big Two-Hearted River’ and Stein’s ‘Picasso,’” clearly examines “the modernist moment to which these writers respond” and then argues that “Hemingway branches off Stein to fashion trauma literature, which speaks to the modern world and mo-
dernity—namely, a rapidly changing world that was reshaped by war” (10). Katie Owens-Murphy, in “‘Miss Stein Instructs’: Revisiting the Paris Apprenticeship of 1922,” likewise examines the Stein–Hemingway link while nicely “address[ing] their use of repetition at the level of the word, the phrase, and the sentence, which generates a wide range of rhetorical effects, from the destabilization of meaning to the formal representation of sequential motion” (23), in such works as “Picasso,” Three Lives, and “Soldier’s Home.” In “Hemingway, Stevens and the Meditative Poetry of ‘Extraordinary Actuality,’” Phillip Beard interrogates Hemingway’s and Stevens’s works, based on the latter’s claim in a letter about the former’s poetry of “extraordinary actuality.” In particular, Beard’s assertion that “meditative and poetic aspects of Hemingway’s actual fiction, as distinct from his biography and persona, are in thematic tension with rhetorics of force, resistance, or manful striving” (30–31) undergirds his teaching model. James Carothers’s essay, “Our Greatest American Modernists: Teaching Hemingway and Faulkner Together,” examines the authors who are arguably America’s Ur-modernists. “Teaching these two great contemporaries and rivals together,” Carothers posits, “allows students to read their fictions in a variety of ways, first requiring that they get a firm grasp on the obvious aspects of both writers’ work” (42). As Carothers describes his own teaching, “I also promise them that Hemingway, as I read him, is not all that simple, and Faulkner, I hope, is not quite as difficult as he is often made out to be” (43). Anna Lillios, in “From Paris to Eatonville, Florida: Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises and Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God,” offers what might seem an unlikely pairing of Hurston and Hemingway, yet she successfully examines how these authors explored modernist concerns with moral values, race, self-identity and otherness, and gender equality. For Lillios, “meaning is, in fact, frustrated because of a slippage through boundaries of race, gender, and class” in these two complementary yet distinct novels (52), from authors whose thematic and contextual links beg further study.

The middle four chapters focus on the rich geographical and cultural places of Hemingway’s modernism—particularly Paris and Spain. Meg Gillette’s “The Sun Also Rises and the ‘Stimulating Strangeness’ of Paris” discusses teaching Hemingway’s work about Paris in Paris, through a study-abroad program. For Gillette, “studying expatriate literature while living in Paris allows students to see their own questions about the ‘stimulating strangeness’ of the city refracted back to them by the novel, and as they gain from literature new ways of thinking about their own encounters with difference in the modern metropolis, they experience literature as equipment for living” (70).
ing the Avant-Garde Hemingway: Early Modernism in Paris," Adam McKee successfully takes a literary–contextual approach while just as successfully examining the early, experimental Hemingway of the "Paris 1922" sketches, In Our Time, "Up in Michigan," and "On Writing." These early writings, for McKee, are “particularly rich” in framing “the influences on Hemingway’s early, experimental modernism” (72)—namely, Stein, Joyce, and Cezanne. David Barnes, in “Teaching Hemingway Beyond ‘The Lost Generation’: European Politics and American Modernism,” usefully situates Hemingway’s modernism in terms of American and European cultural history. “What would happen,” he asks, “if we read Hemingway as part of an early twentieth-century cultural matrix, one in which the work of other writers, newspaper reports, and visual culture contributed equally to the picture?” (82). Jean Jespersen Bartholomew, in “Twentieth-Century Titans: Orwell and Hemingway’s Convergence through Place and Time,” pairs two authors who are mainstays in secondary school and college curricula. For Jespersen Bartholomew, the authors “had similar multigenred approaches to developing their crafts and acquiring materials by means of immersed experience. Their stylistic aims overlapped as well, with Hemingway working to achieve a clean, bold, new style and Orwell wanting to strip away all adjectives. Considered together, the two deserve a serious look not typically given them in juxtaposition within modernism” (92).

The final six chapters adopt various cultural and theoretical lenses for understanding Hemingway’s modernism both in its own time and in ours. Margaret E. Wright-Cleveland’s “The Developing Modernism of Toomer, Hemingway, and Faulkner” examines the intersections of aesthetics, structure, and race among these three key authors. “The development of modernism in America,” she writes, “was pivotal to the development of twentieth-century culture, literature, and politics and continues to influence today’s culture. Indeed, understanding the shift in worldview explored through early twentieth-century modernism enriches one’s understanding of current culture, literature, and politics” (105). In “The Futurist Origins of Hemingway’s Modernism,” Bradley Bowers takes a welcome look at some political–artistic influences on Hemingway through the lens of futurism, specifically “the shared aesthetic and philosophical roots of futurism and modernism” (117). For Bowers, “the experimental aesthetic and attitudes Hemingway expressed in In Our Time (1925), the carefully nuanced philosophical stance of The Sun Also Rises (1926), and the ruthless yet romantic heroism of A Farewell to Arms (1929) especially illustrate the writer’s place in the developing futurist movement (118). Lauren Rule Maxwell, in “Hemingway, His Contemporaries, and the
South Carolina Corps of Cadets: Exploring Veterans’ Inner Worlds,” takes a fascinating approach to teaching cadets at the Citadel about Hemingway’s veterans in conjunction with Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby. For Rule Maxwell, the cadets’ “analyses of these connections, which were facilitated in part by my asking the students to consider how all of the works we read over the course of the semester serve as meditations on American history, help explain how the cadets used Hemingway’s portrayals of veterans in his short stories to develop an understanding of ways World War I experiences informed identity in modernist works on a broader scale” (129).

Sharon Hamilton anchors her dynamic, lively work in “Teaching Hemingway’s Modernism in Cultural Context: Helping Students Connect His Time to Ours” to the cultural context of the era through music, media, and other venues. “I believe students will more profoundly connect with a literary work,” she writes, “if its contents become—literally—tangible for them” (137), such as through in–class musical performances, a lesson on dancing the Charleston, and a virtual walking tour of 1920s Paris. Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera’s “On Teaching ‘Homage to Switzerland’ as an Introduction to Postmodern Literature” offers a dual modernist–postmodernist view of a nuanced Hemingway story. For Herlihy-Mera, “the structures in the story are useful in making postmodern concepts—and their links to the physical sciences and psychology—accessible to students” (149); furthermore, this story “constitutes an excellent example of his use of postmodern mechanisms, and a close examination of its departure from standard literary tropes should reveal an ever-present and yet generally unstudied dimension of Hemingway’s work” (150). Lastly, Andrew Fletcher, in “Chasing New Horizons: Considerations for Teaching Hemingway and Modernism in a Digital Age,” links Hemingway to Thornton Wilder in offering a pedagogy that meaningfully advances the role of digital humanities in literary studies. For Fletcher, “juxtaposing the work of an Ur-modernist like Hemingway to that of a less celebrated but equally prolific writer such as Thornton Wilder could allow students to discover the more nuanced tendencies, techniques, and style associated with modernism, rather than just the literary figures and times” (160). While offering the close analysis, contextualization, and research that Fletcher does, teacher-scholars can employ different media and technologies to deepen students’ understanding of Hemingway in both modernism and modernist studies.

The appendixes contain writing and discussion prompts for deepening students’ work with Hemingway; I aim for these to be useful, constructive, yet adaptable for particular course needs and class sizes. Herein readers will
find a series of specific classroom exercises and writing assignments that we hope will be useful for various high school, undergraduate, and graduate curricula. The contributors and I share a belief in the need to offer concrete classroom practices, writing prompts, and specific discussion questions in a teaching collection—all of which help us expand students’ interpretations of Hemingway’s work and context. We hope these tools will be applicable, accessible, and adaptable for various learning environments and types of students, while also highlighting the rich connections between the teaching of writing and the teaching of various literary texts and movements.

The fifteen essays and related appendixes of *Teaching Hemingway and Modernism* balance text, context, and classroom practice while considering a broad, student-centric audience. In many respects, we are ultimately gearing our work to the current generation of Hemingway and modernism students, some of whom will also comprise the next generation of teachers offering their students ways of thinking about what modernism is, should be, and can be. These same future teachers may also be thinking about where we will continue to locate Hemingway in such a diverse, expansive moment.

Note

1. See also Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” *PMLA* 123.3 (2008): 737–48. In this article, the authors usefully and persuasively outline how modernist studies have expanded temporally, spatially, and vertically.
In examining the similarities in modernist style in the acclaimed early work of Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein, I will treat the modernist moment to which these writers respond while also contextualizing their works in relation to each other. I will then consider how Hemingway branches off Stein to fashion trauma literature, which speaks to the modern world and modernity—namely a rapidly changing world that was reshaped by war. Such an examination should be of aid in teaching these works to lower-level undergraduate students, although the points I present could be extrapolated and refashioned easily for use in high school or upper-level college courses. Each year, I teach Hemingway and Stein in tandem in an undergraduate Introduction to Fiction course that focuses on modernist prose. At the end of the unit that includes Hemingway, students effectively demonstrate close reading skills that are sharpened by their experience in reading his work for implications and subtext. They also can showcase their knowledge of representative characteristics of modernist literature, as well as their ability to produce responsible interpretations of Hemingway’s oft-anthologized story (and the longest one in the celebrated collection *In Our Time*) “Big Two-Hearted River” (1925).

As one would expect in an introduction to fiction course, students study the components of fiction and learn to identify and analyze them before articulating the significance of doing so and/or the significance of the text itself. This approach to “Big Two-Hearted River” is traditional. However, what I have found to be additionally effective—in the American literature course, a course on modernism, or one on introductory fiction—is pairing Hemingway
with Stein, so students can tease out the similarities and differences in their writing and add additional interpretive strategies, especially critical close reading skills, to their arsenal. When students understand what Stein is doing with her cubist portraits, then they can more successfully read Hemingway’s cubist *In Our Time* with sensitivity and discernment. In my experience, it is useful to first teach something of Stein’s that is relatively short and easy, like her prose portrait “Picasso,” because a story like “Big Two-Hearted River” looks deceptively simple and also functions as a kind of prose portrait of Nick Adams, locating him in the modernist moment in the same way that Stein so places Picasso. Moreover, Stein’s style (primarily her use of repetition), her modernist experimentation in form, and her simple diction, are qualities that Hemingway borrows yet refines for his own purposes.

In “Picasso,” first published in Alfred Stieglitz’s journal *Camera Work* in 1912 and collected in Stein’s *Selected Writings*, Stein presents her opinion of the painter and of his new style, cubism. By extension, we can discern reflexive commentary: in other words, we see Stein valorizing the new artistic style, by transposing the painterly elements of cubism to literature and, in fact, mirroring what Picasso is doing in her own work. In “Picasso,” she marries form with content. As Stein herself asserts, “I was alone at this time in understanding [Picasso], perhaps because I was expressing the same thing in literature” (qtd. in Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* 118). On the first day of our study of Stein, we list on the whiteboard what the students observe about her writing, focusing on her language and style. To bolster their observations, I ask students to give me examples from “Picasso,” a text short enough that they can revisit and reread parts of it closely in class. If the students are hesitant to offer their thoughts or ideas (typically, Stein’s writing strikes them as bizarre and unreadable), I prompt them by selecting passages that highlight her use of repetition and cubist perspective and asking different students to read those passages aloud. Then I ask them what they notice and how those elements function in the text. (In my experience, students are never quiet at this point in the class.) Any paragraph in “Picasso” achieves our purpose of foregrounding Stein’s modernist, cubist aesthetic. With this guidance, students will note that repetition in “Picasso” is employed to emphasize that the subject of the piece, Pablo Picasso, is an artistic pioneer who produces “a real meaning” (Stein, “Picasso” 294). His art is “a solid thing, a charming thing, a lovely thing, a perplexing thing, a disconcerting thing, a simple thing, a clear thing, a complicated thing, an interesting thing, a disturbing thing, a repellant thing, a very pretty thing” (Stein, “Picasso” 294). In mimicking a cubist approach, albeit in
writing, Stein offers us different perspectives, ideas, and positions on cubism and on Picasso’s work in particular. The adjectives in this passage point to different opinions on Picasso’s art. We know the denotation of every word in this portrait: that does not confuse our students or us. What is so startlingly experimental and strikingly odd is how the words are linked together and the portrait organized. We are not treated to a biographical explanation: Picasso’s characteristics are to be inferred (i.e., he is a hard and productive worker and a genius). We know that he is charming because Stein insists on it in whimsical repetition: “One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom some were following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were following was one who was certainly completely charming” (Stein, “Picasso” 293; emphasis added). What we can infer is that not everyone found Picasso and/or his work to be charming, and in this portrait, Stein insists on her point of view while also alluding to a range of other responses to Picasso. If I have not already introduced the students to cubism when we begin our unit on modernism, I do show images of Picasso’s work to them, and I have discovered that the best examples of Picasso’s art for my pedagogical purposes are ones that have titles that reportedly tell us what the paintings are depicting, as, for instance, Picasso’s 1912–14 Guitar series.3

When students move patiently through Stein’s portrait of Picasso and are prompted to explain what it is telling us, they get it right. But they have to slow down and read closely: they have to concentrate on what we are being told and consider what is left out and why that matters. Because I want to show students that they can approach and interpret Stein’s work (and, later, Hemingway’s), I remind them that they know what the denotations of the words are. On a very literal level, I ask them to tell me what we know about Picasso and his art from Stein: after all, this text is a prose portrait, and we are told some very concrete things about him. We then proceed to see what we can make of the text in terms of interpretation. We discuss how Stein’s writing calls attention to itself and, how, by extension, she is calling our attention to our very own reading strategies. We might have to read differently from the ways in which we have read other literary texts: we need to read attentively, patiently, and creatively so that we can determine how to engage the text to make meaning(s). Simply reading out loud—having the students take turns—helps tremendously in putting into relief the modernist and cubist techniques, because the compression, excision, fracturing, and reassembling inherent in the language and style of the piece become more readily apparent. I make it a point of calling on every student in
the class, and I ask one or two students to comment on what another student has read, making it clear that they can say anything at all. Picasso pioneered a new style of painting and became a tastemaker, much as Stein and Hemingway would become the literary pioneers and tastemakers of modernist literature, and their contemporaries did not find them easy to understand.4

It might help students to know that, as a friend and inspiration, Picasso was to Stein someone worthy of championing; by replicating his style in her piece about him, she offers a kind (of) homage. Hence her experimental portrait, by its very cubist nature, bypasses conventional expectations of biographical details, but it intentionally gives us Stein’s take and impression of Picasso and his work (as well as the impressions of others). In that vein, “Picasso” is very much a subjective portrait that pivots on cubist style. It delivers an impression of Picasso through an approach informed by a fragmented modern world that attempts to put the pieces together to form a coherent and seemingly unified and whole narrative.

The careful attention to detail and close reading required in interpreting Stein likewise must be activated in interpreting Hemingway’s work. These two writers present us with literary artifacts that speak to and capture the modernist moment, one marked by—as reductive as this list might seem to veteran scholars and readers of modernism—experimentation, fragmentation, disillusionment (the “lost generation”), opaqueness, subjectivity and foregrounding of perception, and an aesthetic of intellectualism and difficulty. The most defining events in the modern world were World War I and World War II, two forces of modernity that ushered in the contemporary world as we know it. The fast pace of technological innovation informed warfare to such an extent that it drastically altered the nature of war: those engaged in it no longer needed to see the enemy at close range, and they could wreak devastation more quickly and efficiently than ever before. Even as early as 1947, Robert Penn Warren argues in his essay on Hemingway that “the shadow of ruin [read: trauma] is behind the typical Hemingway [literary] situation” (444). Both Stein and Hemingway were writing in a very specific place in terms of culture and literary and socio-history; their work responds to their time accordingly. Yet Hemingway’s work arguably surpasses Stein in its treatment of war trauma and the modern response to traumatization.

Hemingway’s two-part short story “Big Two-Hearted River” was first published in the little magazine This Quarter before being included in In Our Time. While I do not teach In Our Time in its entirety—in fact, for my 200-level Introduction to Fiction course, I teach this text as a representative one from
Hemingway—I do explain to my students that In Our Time is a modernist collection of violent narratives that reverberates with traumatic representations and speaks to the world in which Hemingway and his contemporaries lived. Because Stein influenced Hemingway—and because their work exhibits cubist qualities—I ask students to consider how Hemingway’s early prose evokes Stein’s and how what we have learned about cubist literature from Stein’s “Picasso” allows us a metaphorical segue into Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River.”

As Linda Wagner-Martin observes, by combining Ezra Pound’s relentless editing (and terseness) “with Gertrude Stein’s larger imperatives that usually dealt with capturing emotional states, Hemingway could pare away some parts of the conventional story and leave the stark bones that comprise his best works” (35). Wagner-Martin also believes that it is most productive to read Nick Adams from In Our Time as “a returning veteran” because she makes a compelling case that Hemingway’s writing may be “more autobiographical than reviewers wanted to see it as being” (40–41). I find this feature important to note, but I must admit that I was teaching “Big Two-Hearted River” as a story about a veteran, a man who had some experience of war, before I knew that it could, in fact, be read as autobiographical. One reaches the same conclusion as biographers by isolating the traditional components of fiction, analyzing each, and reassembling them in relation to each other. (I have not yet assigned a biographical essay or chapter for students to read in my Introduction to Fiction class, mostly because we are focused on developing close reading skills of primary texts.)

Considering to what extent Hemingway adheres to and deviates from conventional prose expectations affords students the opportunity to become better close readers and astute readers of sophisticated texts. It is certainly possible to generate multiple strong readings of “Big Two-Hearted River,” but the reading I am presenting here has been sanctioned as arguably the most persuasive one. Indeed, Frederic J. Svoboda classifies “Big Two-Hearted River” as exhibiting the “great themes in Hemingway,” specifically in connection with wilderness and innocence (or the lack thereof). According to him, “Big Two-Hearted River” is “where Nick as a young man finds a refuge from war and responsibility in a fishing trip to a burned-over wilderness” (Svoboda 168–69).

As Hemingway himself writes tellingly, “Big Two-Hearted River’ is about a boy coming home beat to the wide [sic] from a war. Beat to the wide as an earlier and possibly more severe form of beat, since those who had it were unable to comment on this condition and could not suffer that it be mentioned in their presence. So the war, all mention of the war, anything about the war, is omitted. . . . [T]he war was in the story” (“Art of the Short Story” 88).
One of the basic strategies in analyzing fiction requires us to consider the setting. In Hemingway’s work, as in Stein’s, every detail matters, including the organization and presentation of material. That “Big Two-Hearted River” opens with “burnt timber” tells us that this is a world that has been damaged (IOT 133), and one that has been damaged at every level: at the microcosmic level by a recent fire and at the macrocosmic level by war. Nick desires to hike into the Michigan hills because from the top he can see that the “burned country stopped off at the left with the range of hills” and “ahead islands of dark pine rose out of the plain” as far as his eye can see (135). He is retreating into nature to heal, and his motivations can be gleaned throughout the story, which leads us into characterization and what is, for me, the most powerful element of the story.

In fleshing out who Nick is, we focus on what he says and what he does. I mark passages that I think are key, but I also ask students to offer examples that illuminate Nick’s character. With our selected passages, we engage in close reading and discuss what we know about Nick and why it might be important for us to know what we do. Normally, we would also be in a position to consider what other characters say to or about our protagonist, but, in reading this experimental fiction, we are not privy to other perspectives. Even Nick’s thoughts are masked from us; we are ostensibly being treated to a limited or selective omniscient point of view. The reader is given access to the thoughts and actions of a single character, but there is a compromise between first-person narration and third-person narration. This narrative point of view keeps us centered on Nick’s (compulsive) concentration on pragmatic concerns, tasks related to hiking, making a camp, and fishing. With only one notable exception, he does not delve into his psyche, does not reflect on his identity, past, or motivations. Nick aligns himself with what we now recognize as the archetypal Hemingway hero whose masculinity finds expression in a love for the outdoors, a rugged individualism, and adherence to a code of strength and independence that keeps weakness at bay on most occasions.

The gaps in “Big Two-Hearted River” result in a startling lack of full character development and thwart the reader’s expectations regarding plot. Yet paradoxically, since the story revolves around Nick, he is among the keys to unlocking the complexities of the plot and characterization. We are thus forced to figure out who Nick is based on what little we know. I do this in the classroom by first asking students to outline the plot and then listing what we know about Nick from the outset. To begin to apprehend and comprehend him (and, by extension, his world), we can engage in detective work in the realm of identity politics. Dominick LaCapra conceptualizes identity politics as “a grid of
subject positions,” and adds that a great problem in research is that, “through processes of identification or excessive objectification, one remains [caught] within that grid” (175). In hindsight, relevant questions pertaining to Nick’s identity politics (what it means to be an “I”) include: What does it mean to be a man? What does it feel like to be shell-shocked? How does one recover and heal from trauma according to a Hemingway-sanctioned code of honor?

The “I” of “Big Two-Hearted River” emphasizes the present while engaging, stoically, in masculine-coded activities and behavior. (Note: My students enjoy identifying the qualities of the Hemingway hero as embodied by Nick and elaborating by unpacking their examples.) In the story, the painful recent past is elided, as is any serious, long-term consideration of the future. Students can conjecture why this is the case, and most of the time they will cite trauma as the determining force that motivates Nick. In light of this discussion, a prose refrain, with slight variations, should be noted in the story: “this was good” (IOT 140). Considering Hemingway’s understated, minimalist style and the quintessential gaps present in modernist literature at large, we know that the refrain is a signal that this good place is counterbalanced by what is, or has been, not good. The narrator’s linear relation of events and intense concentration on mundane detail may prompt an unwary reader to interpret the story as a mere travelogue. But if we are to mine or cull a theme from the text, we have to pay attention both to what is said and to what is not said. Why is Nick camping and fishing by himself, especially when he recalls male bonding with Hopkins so fondly? (In this regard, Nick comments that he “did not like to fish with other men on the river. Unless they were of your party they spoiled it” (149), which implies conversely that it is enjoyable to fish with friends.) He decides to make coffee the way that Hop would, thinking “Hop deserved that” (141). However, Nick’s sentimentalism—what amounts to a nostalgic reflection, strange for him—devolves into the harsh realization of the present day, though he laughs good-naturedly at the outcome: “The coffee was bitter,” yet that “made a good ending to the story” (142). The postwar world differed sharply from the prewar one, and Nick’s life is not as it was, especially for someone who needs to recover and heal from trauma. My reading of “Big Two-Hearted River” is informed by my research specialty, which is trauma studies in conjunction with twentieth-century American literature. When I teach this piece, I unfold it by guiding students in analyzing traditional components of fiction; I ask them to consider the contexts of the story, illustrating them and providing examples, as I have attempted to do here. As a class, we examine and discuss the following in terms of conventional expectations of prose: plot
and dramatic structure, characterization, point of view, setting, symbolism, style and tone, and themes. Those components I have not yet treated in this chapter, I will touch on shortly, but I have found asking students to locate (and analyze) examples from the text to be very effective strategy in fostering active participation, student ownership of learning, and lively discussion. My students and I ask the following questions related to context: What was the world like in 1925? What are the moods and themes of In Our Time's other stories? What are the hallmarks of modernist (American) literature, as exemplified in Stein's “Picasso” and Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River”? How might the ways we were able to approach and open up Stein's work apply to Hemingway's?

Hemingway's painstaking romanticization of the natural world in his work and the lack of any obvious conflict in “Big Two-Hearted River” (required in the plot trajectory of traditional fiction) show students that something is amiss—that something is there, but not directly. Our narrator tells us that the pine chip is fresh and the wood is clean—all pristine and idyllic—and that the soggy onion sandwiches that he has carried and dipped in the stream, along with the water he is drinking out of his hat, presumably soiled from hiking and camping, are delicious and to be desired (IOT 146, 154). And students will rightly point out that the only overt conflict in this story is when the leader breaks on the fishing pole in part 2. Clearly, by breaking down the story into its formal components, we can see what is left out and what is emphasized. Characterization and setting supersede plot development and the emergence of obvious themes. Hemingway's deceptively simple language is indebted to Stein, and his disregard for fleshing out conventional structures and narratives (also influenced by Stein) means that we need to attend to what is repeated (foregrounded) and what is elided or left out, which I see as metaphorical red flags in this story. The symbols and symbolic acts in Hemingway's texts contain and detain meanings until students (and professors) are patient enough to begin to tease out the meanings in light of the rest of the story and what we know about related contexts. Stein's prose portrait “Picasso” can serve as such a context, preparing us to enter into Hemingway's “Big Two-Hearted River.”

The carefully crafted symbols and symbolic acts in “Big Two-Hearted River” offer us, if we read from a perspective informed by Stein, a subtext that drives or activates the main ideas of the story. In the beginning, Nick symbolically removes himself from civilization: he intentionally retreats from the scarred ground where grasshoppers are soot-blackened and seeks out communion with nature, where he can take refuge in tranquility and individualistic pastimes. In his own scarred personal world, Nick does what other trauma survivors do:
he copes as best he can. In order to heal, according to the dominant paradigm in trauma studies, trauma survivors must secure a safe place to regroup, learn to tell their trauma story, and reconnect to communities (Herman 3). Nick has succeeded in the first step and appears to be working on the second in the form of this story/testimony as he tries to make sense of it. Unfortunately, he appears to be a long way from reconnecting to a community and establishing a sense of belonging. Indeed, the narrative ends as follows: “He was going back to [his solitary] camp. . . . There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp” (IOT 156). While he may not be fully recovered and healed from a presumable trauma that animates his actions and haunts his behavior, Nick retreats from tragedy both at the macrocosmic and microcosmic levels. Students can map conceptually (or graphically on a traditional map or a digital document) where Nick physically goes in the story: he retreats from a wider world to a more private one. But he also retreats from anything with the potential to be traumatic: “In the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it. He did not want to go down the stream any further today” (IOT 155). Employing Stein’s favorite technique, repetition, to call readers’ attention to something vitally important to the message of the story, Hemingway shows us that Nick refrains from seeking out the traumatic: his purpose in fishing is to heal himself, not to inflict or take on anything that invites or smacks of tragedy, because trauma has marked Nick and caught him in its grip; in the words of Dori Laub, “[trauma survivors] live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect” (69). In response to what has wounded him, Nick’s body acts out and retreats from any potential threats or triggers. The violent imagery of Nick gutting his fish correlates to the violent world he has experienced—and, at some level, Hemingway’s readers may have known—during the war.

I am drawn to this story partly because of its sensitive treatment of a traumatized character endeavoring to heal, to not only survive but thrive in the modern world. And we must remember that Nick’s postwar world is a brutal one. As Susan Sontag poignantly states to those of us who are civilians, “We don’t get it. We truly can’t imagine what it was like. We can’t imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can’t understand, can’t imagine. That’s what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time under fire, and had the luck
to elude death that struck down others nearby, stubbornly feels. And they are
right” (126). In Nick Adams, Hemingway gives us the gift of a courageous and
enduring personality: one who endeavors to roll with the punches and right
wrongs. From the perspectives of the students I have taught, the joy they might
discover in studying Hemingway and “Big Two-Hearted River” lies in their
ability to open up a story that is rich in complexity and that still resonates for
readers in the twenty-first century in its treatment of masculinity and trauma.

Notes

1. According to Michael North, Hemingway dubbed himself “Hemingstein” to pay
homage to Stein as his mentor: “Stein was, then, in the most complicated way possible,
Hemingway’s aesthetic proxy” (North 195). In delineating their similarities and dif-
f erences, North remarks, “The chief characteristic of the Anderson-Stein-Hemingway
brand of modernism was to be its restoration of direct, colloquial language. For
Hemingway more purely than for any other male modernist this was a masculinist
project, and clarity of reference was to be a masculine virtue. Here, however, directness
of reference leads straight to a gap . . .” (North 198‒99).

2. Jacqueline V. Brogan stresses that “Stein’s importance as an author and influence is
not limited to the impact of cubism on the literature of her time. Her profound influence
on Ernest Hemingway, who in most instances should not be called a cubist writer (In
Our Time being a notable exception if one regards it, as I do, as a ‘cubist anatomy’ rather
than a collection of short stories) is illimitable, as it is on others. [H]er stylistic presence
. . . is clear from his first successful short stories throughout his novels” (260).

3. It may be useful to show Picasso’s portrait Gertrude Stein (1905–6), which was
painted before Picasso’s cubist period, alongside one of his cubist works as an instruc-
tive juxtaposition on what cubism is not and what it is.

4. In “On Writing,” Hemingway has Nick Adams (the main character in “Big Two-
Hearted River”) declare, “He wanted to write like Cezanne [sic] painted.” Nick adds,
“He could see the Cezannes. The portrait at Gertrude Stein’s. She’d know if he ever got
things right” (“On Writing” 239). In reference to this manuscript, Stein writes, “He had
added to his stories a little story of meditations. . . . It was then that Gertrude Stein
said, Hemingway, remarks are not literature” (Stein, Alice B. Toklas 207).

5. Students can respond to Daniel Joseph Singal’s following synopsis of cubism and
consider the ways in which Hemingway maximizes the utility of a cubist style in relating
a narrative about trauma and recovery (a scenario in which the subject feels broken
and strives toward healing and wholeness) in “Big Two-Hearted River”: “Picasso and
his colleagues maintained [that] all objects would have to be seen in shifting relation
to each other. The painter’s task was thus to break up forms into component parts and
have those parts continuously overlap, conveying not so much a sense of fragmentation
as of wholeness. Sharp outlines were always to be avoided; rather, colors and textures
were to bleed from one object into another, with subdued colors usually employed to
enhance the sense of unity. Whenever possible, both the interior and the exterior of a form were to be rendered alongside each other; likewise the background was to have the same value and prominence as the main subject of the painting, and the two were to interpenetrate” (Singal, “American Modernism” 118‒19).


7. Another interpretation that elaborates on this one posits that Nick is escaping “the twin evils” of modern war and modern civilization. It takes into account that Nick leaves his books, artifacts of civilization, behind him. See Sean McCann, “Teaching In Our Time in Our Time: An Online Professional Development Seminar,” America in Class, sponsored by the National Humanities Center, accessed 13 Dec. 2012, <http://americainclass.org/seminars/teaching-in-our-time-in-our-time/>. For McCann, “Big Two-Hearted River” is Hemingway’s response to the problem of how to act honorably in a dishonorable world: a man should get out, go into nature (preferably the Upper Peninsula of Michigan), and fish, which presents itself as a desirable antidote because nature does not let one down. See the following passage from the beginning of “Big Two-Hearted River”: “Nick felt happy. He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him” (IOT 134). Another passage toward the end presents a caveat, however: “He wished he had brought something to read. He felt like reading” (IOT 155).