

The Least, The Most:

Hemingway's writing style

LE MOINS , LE PLUS:

LE STYLE D'ÉCRIT CHEZ HEMINGWAY

Yu Qin¹

Abstract: Hemingway's style of writing is striking, he is skillful in using the "pause" and is considered as a master of the "pause" in literature. Hemingway, in contrast to romantic writers, puts stress on restraint and understatement. The most powerful effect comes from them. People feel overtones in his description of scenes, in his characters' actions, in the dialogues and also in his psychological portraying. Hemingway's spirit is under the silent surface, and his pause has the sense of beauty.

Key words: pause, restraint, understatement

Résumé: Le style d'écrit chez Hemingway est frappant , il est habile en l'usage de " pause " et est considéré comme maître de "pause" dans la littérature . Par rapport des autres écrivains romantiques , Hemingway met l'accent sur la sobriété et la litote , dont provient l'effet le plus puissant . On constate des sous-entendus dans sa description des scènes , dans les actions des héros , dans les dialogues ainsi que dans les descriptions psychologiques . L'esprit de Hemingway est derrière la surface silencieuse , et son " pause " a le sens de beauté .

Mots-clés: pause, sobriété, litote

Hemingway's style of writing is striking, especially his skill in using the "pause". His sentences are short, his words simple, yet they are often filled with emotion. A careful reading can show us he is a master of the pause.

If we look closely, we see how the action of his stories continues during the silences, and during the time that his characters say nothing. This action is often full of meaning. The most powerful effect comes from restraint. This kind of effect often occurs in Hemingway's fiction. He perfected the art of conveying emotion with few words.

The romantic writers often emphasize abundance while Hemingway, in contrast to them, puts stress on restraint and understatement. He believes that "the strongest effect comes with an economy of means".

This is not to say that Hemingway's work is either emotionless or dull. No! Reading his works, we always feel overtones. in his description of scenes, in his characters' actions, in the dialogues and also in his psychological portraying.

As a master of the pause, Hemingway describes

scenes simply, but gives them implied meaning.

At the very start of "A Farewell to Arms", a short introductory scene presents an ominous conjunction of images: rain, fallen leaves, death and pregnancy. All these set the mood for the whole theme, and they prefigure the tragedy and despair. Let's see the sad scene during the war:

"... and in the fall when the rains came, the leaves all fell from the chestnut trees and the branches were bare and the trunks black with rain. The vineyards were thin and bare-branched too and all the country wet and brown and dead with the autumn."

"A Farewell to Arms" has a strong anti-war tendency. Instead of writing the war with much terrible description, Hemingway just draws some images for us: the bad weather, the soldiers' feelings, and the painful moans in the hospital ... From all these images, we know that the war hurt people's feelings and take away people's happiness.

In the short story "Hill Like White Elephants", there

¹ School of Foreign Languages, China.

* Received 3 March 2005; accepted 11 March 2005

is a scene which strikes me. Although it is very simple, there is implied meaning in Hemingway's pause:

"Far away, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees."

The young woman is worrying about the future, though Hemingway doesn't say much about her feelings. What he leaves behind is the depressing atmosphere.

In each of Hemingway's works, there are many many scenes which are common at first glance but rich in meaning. He just puts the pictures before you and lets readers to study them carefully. Hemingway gets off the all explanations and the comments; he gets rid of all the similes and the unnecessary adjectives. Yet by means of his pause, his simple and clean pictures are quite enough for us to understand him.

This pure and clean writing is Hemingway's style. There are countless examples of such writing in his works.

When he describes the characters' actions, Hemingway is also a master of the pause. He expresses all what he wants to say through his characters' actions. He does not force readers to react by his explanation and comment but calls for their reaction.

In "The Old Man and The Sea", there is description which attracts me deeply:

"Up the road, in his shack, the old man was sleeping again. He was still sleeping on his face and the boy was sitting by him watching him. The old man was dreaming about the lions".

Hemingway's pen stops here. But he leaves much room for our imagination. Where does the old man's energy come from? What does he stand for? What does his failure stand for? What does the ending mean?... We get much from Hemingway's description. The child gave the old man warmth and comfort, but the 'American lion' could just appear in the old man's dream.

Once again, in "A Farewell to Arms", a young woman named Catherine Barkley who was pregnant with Henry's child, died in childbirth. Henry was left, at the end, with nothing:

"You can't come in yet."

'You get out,' I said. 'The other one too.'

But after I had got them out and shut the door and turned off the light it wasn't any good. It was like saying goodbye to a stature. After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain."²

The novel stops here suddenly. But where would Fredric Henry go after he had walked back to the hotel? Where is his last place? Hemingway doesn't explain.

Although he stops here, the ending arouses our sentimental doubt. By the time the last farewell is taken, a man is trapped, Hemingway seems to be saying, Henry is trapped biologically and socially; either way it can only and badly and there are no other ways. Life, both personal and social, is a struggle, in which the loser takes nothing.

We can't forget the description of the major whose wife has just died:

"He looked straight past me and out through the window. Then he began to cry. 'I'm utterly unable to resign myself,' he said and choked. And then crying, his head up looking at nothing, carrying himself straight and soldierly, with tears on both his cheeks and biting his lips, he walked past the machines and out the door."³

The sketch leaves a strong impression on my mind. Although Hemingway doesn't use such kind of words as 'sad', 'despairing' etc., I feel the major's sadness and despair through his eyesight and his postures.

Hemingway never writes about emotion. He states the affair that his characters experienced.

Readers' excitement, surprise, regret or sadness are derived from his understatement.

The dialogue is equally striking. Hemingway is able to bring a character swiftly to life. His dialogues are not the record of the speakers' style, but with much overtones. A characteristic effect is in understatement. In Hemingway's dialogues, those who want to cover up their pain and despair and those who make secret of their feelings, try to talk with terse and unliterary tone, but the flat simplicity is powerful and sparkling. Almost each of his dialogues is meaningfully constructed.

Once reading his "The Short Life of Francis Macomber", you can never forget the dialogues between the wife and Wilson, the hunter. The slight and complicated feelings are expressed through dialogues: Macomber's upset, the wife's queer way of talking and Wilson's calm tone etc. The following is a good example:

"That was a pretty thing to do," he said in a toneless voice, "He would have left you too."

"Stop it," she said.

"Of course it's an accident," he said. "I know that."

"Stop it," she said.

"Don't worry," he said. "There will be a certain amount of unpleasantness but I will have some photographs taken that will be very useful at the inquest. There's the testimony of the gun-bearers and the driver too. You're perfectly all right."

"Stop it," she said.

"There's a hell of a lot to be done," he said. "And I'll have to send a truck off to the lake to wireless for a plane

² *A Farewell to Arms*, chapter 41.

³ *In Another Country*

to take the three of us into Nairobi. Why didn't you poison him? That's what they do in England."

"Stop it. Stop it. Stop it," the woman cried.

"I'm through now," he said "I was a little angry. I'd begun to like your husband."

"Oh, please stop it," she said. "Please, Please stop it."

"That's better," Wilson said. "Please is much better. Now I'll stop."

The woman said "stop it" eight times all together. They look the same. But we can feel the gradual intensity of the woman's complex emotion even we can see her face and there is a sudden unforgettable revelation on her face — though the sentences of the dialogue are very simple. The wife killed her husband and she was upset and was filled with contrariety. But the hunter Wilson was quite different. He was calm. He said all those words maintaining his composure. What a simple and rich dialogue! Without writing the feelings of the characters, without writing their anger, regret, upset, despair or tenderness, and in spite of the speed spoken, Hemingway arouses readers' imagination and emotion only by his careful selecting of the dialogue. All the tones and feelings are concealed under the dialogue which is very natural.

An example can be found easily in his famous short story "Hills Like White Elephants".

In this story, a man is taking his girl to do an operation which is illegal. Hemingway doesn't mention the girl's fright or sadness at all. The couple are waiting for the train at a table in the station. It's very hot. They are drinking beers and talking. The story mainly consists of dialogues between the couple. Hemingway does nothing to affect readers by his discussions or analysis. From the very beginning to the end, instead, he just uses direct dialogues which are remarkable and individual. That's quite enough.

"Do you feel better?" he asked. "I feel fine," she said. "There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine."

Calm tones conceal strong upset. The girl repeated "I feel fine". It sounds usual but in fact it reflects her complex feelings. In any case, the illegal and dangerous operation is a heavy burden to a young lady, let alone, she is going to a strange place which is very far away from her homeland. What Hemingway requests us is to co-operate with him and grasp the overtones and feelings outside the dialogue.

Hemingway's pause is frequently used in his dialogues. All what the characters said are short, but at their best, are uniquely capable of conveying implications, for in the very shortness lies its greatest strength. Hemingway's pause in dialogues can discover depths of meaning in the casual speech; it can suggest in shortness what could not be stated in a volume — the vision of a world; the glimpse of truth; the capture of a

moment in time etc. All these great themes are omitted by Hemingway. But when we read his works we feel that the writer has written all what Hemingway leaves out.

As what I have mentioned, the characters' psychological processes are concealed in their dialogues and even in silence. That's Hemingway's pause in psychological portraying. "The Killers" is the best example, I think.

Two men were going to kill a Swede Ole Andreson. Nick Adams hurried to Andreson's rooming-house to tell him the news. He saw Andreson lying on the bed, facing the wall. And from then on, he maintained the postures. He always answered Nick in the tone which is motionless.

When Nick told him "... they said they were going to kill you". "Ole Andreson said nothing". And what's more, when Nick said "They were going to shoot you when you came in to supper," "Andreson looked at the wall and did not say anything." It was impossible for Andreson remain indifferent during the long period. Maybe he thought of the two killers; maybe he was recalling the affair that he had gotten mixed up in Chicago; maybe he was thinking hard why he would be killed; may be ... Of course, Andreson would consider much. But Hemingway says nothing about all these. In his pause — the silence of the character, we can grasp Andreson's psychological trail at a guess. And in the meantime, Hemingway portrays Nick's psychology. It's possible that Nick had supposed Andreson's surprise or fright when he heard the awful news; but out of his expectation, Andreson was calm. On hearing his flat voice, Nick's feeling was that his news "sounded silly when he said it." That's quite understandable. Because of Andreson's flat voice and silence, what Nick could do was just "looking at the big man lying on the bed" and helping him by pointing out all kinds of possibilities of avoiding the kill. At last, Nick went out with complex feelings. Up to then, Nick said to Andreson in a quiet tone and looked very calm. Hemingway doesn't say a word about his psychology either. But we know Nick. We know the sadness in his heart.

In "The Killers", the psychology of all the characters are shown in their calmness. The pause attracts us to enjoy his story.

In Hemingway's pause there is deep melody flowing in his works. And under his words there is rhythm in his pause. In "A Farewell to Arms", for example, the rhythm of the seasons is matched to the course of the campaign, with no editorializing from the writer. Victory comes in the spring, and in the autumn, it is otherwise:

"There was fighting for that mountain too, but it was not successful, and in the fall when the rains came the leaves all fell from the chestnut trees and the branches were bare and the trunks black with rain."

An equally effective example is the following brief

description in "A Farewell to Arms". The blood is dripping on from a dying soldier who lies on the stretcher:

"The drops fell very slowly, as they fall from an icicle after the sun has gone."

The gradually pressed melody and rhythm show sadness, despair and death.

Hemingway's description of scenes, his characters' actions, the dialogues and the psychological portraying —— all these are full of pause-skills. So whenever you read his works, you feel their strength and power. His pause suits his feelings. It's a kind of special expression of his emotion. Confining himself to the matter in hand and refusing the aid of literary artifices, Hemingway extracts an amazing richness and

leads readers get an amazing richness below the surface of the narrative.

Hemingway's spirit is under the silent surface. He can leave his meaning implicit and the readers discern it and even help provide it. "I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven eighths of it under water for every part that shows", in "Death in the Afternoon", Hemingway expresses his writing theory so. The result is that he can suggest a sense of intensity of feeling through oblique implication, compressed ideas or understatement. His pause gives a kind of tension and behind the tension, he remains important themes and subtly delineates the personality. His pause has the sense of beauty. An architect once said, "The least, the most". I think his words can be used to describe Hemingway's writing style.

THE AUTHOR

Yu Qin, School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, Hubei, 430000, P. R. China.