

ANALYSIS

“The Snows of Kilimanjaro” (1938)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“Its setting is the final afternoon and evening in the second life of a writer named Harry, dying of gangrene in a camp near the edge of the Tanganyika plains country.... ‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro’ is an experiment in the psychology of a dying man. Like *Across the River and into the Trees*, it contains almost no overt physical activity, though much is implied. Judged in terms of its intention, it is a triumphant piece of writing.

Hemingway’s own experiences on safari help to account for the origin of the story....The general outline of ‘The Snows’ was almost certainly suggested by Hemingway’s own grave illness, the flight out of the plains country, and the distant view of the enormous, snow-capped mountain of Kilimanjaro. During the flight east, and no doubt also during the period of treatment in Nairobi—his head aching and his ears ringing from the effects of emetine—Hemingway had ample time to reflect on a topic which would naturally occur to him in such a situation: the death of a writer before his work is done. As in ‘Francis Macomber,’ however, most of the other circumstances of the story were invented.

Like Hemingway, the writer Harry in the story has been ‘obsessed’ for years with curiosity about the idea of death. Now that it is close he has lost all his curiosity about it, feeling only a ‘great tiredness and anger’ over its inexorable approach. ‘The hardest thing,’ Hemingway had written in *Green Hills of Africa*, is for the writer ‘to survive and get his work done.’ This is mainly because the time available is so short and the temptations not to work are so strong. Harry has succumbed to the temptation not to work at his hard trade. Now his time is over, and possessive death moves in.

The story gains further point and poignancy from another obsession of Harry’s, the deep sense of his loss of artistic integrity.... His creeping gangrene is the mark he bears. He knows that he has traded his former integrity for ‘security and comfort,’ destroying his talent by ‘betrayals of himself and what he believed in’.... The close reader of ‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro’ easily recognizes and responds to its theme of confrontation. The dying writer is far different from the ghost of his former self, the young, free, unsold writer who took all Europe as his oyster and was seriously devoted to his craft....

The story is technically distinguished by the operation of several natural symbols. These are non-literary images, as always in Hemingway, and they have been very carefully selected so as to be in complete psychological conformity with the locale and the dramatic situation. How would the ideas of death and immortality present themselves in the disordered imagination of a writer dying of gangrene as he waits for the plane which is supposed to carry him out of the wilderness to the Nairobi hospital? The death symbols were relatively easy. Every night beasts of prey killed grazing animals and left the pickings to those scavengers of carrion, the vultures and the hyenas.

It is entirely natural that Harry, whose flesh is rotting and noisome—is, in fact, carrion already—should associate these creatures with the idea of dying. As he lies near death in the mimosa shade at the opening of the story, he watches the birds obscenely squatting in the glare of the plain. As night falls and the voice of the hyena is heard in the land, the death image transfers itself from the vultures to this other foul devourer of the dead. With the arrival of his first strong premonition of death, which has no other form than ‘a sudden, evil-smelling emptiness,’ Harry finds without astonishment that the image of the hyena is slipping lightly along the edge of the emptiness. ‘Never believe any of that,’ he tells his wife, ‘about a scythe and a skull.’ His mind has been far away in the days of his former life in Paris, and now it has come back to Africa. ‘It can be two bicycle policemen as easily, or be a bird. Or it can have a wide snout like a hyena.’ Death has just come as it to rest its head on the foot of the cot, the direction from which the infection will

rise up towards the vital center. Presently it moves in on him, crouching on his chest so that he cannot breathe.

Harry's dying directive, 'Never believe any of that about a scythe and a skull,' is an important commentary on Hemingway's own habitual approach to the development of natural symbols. He is prepared to use, where they conform to the requirements of an imaginary situation, any of the more ancient symbols—whether the threes and nines of numerology, or the weight of the Cross in Christian legend. But the scythe and the skull, though ancient enough, simply do not fit the pattern of Harry's death and are therefore rejected in favor of the foul and obscene creatures which have now come to dominate Harry's imagination.

Like the death-symbol, the image for immortality arises 'naturally' out of the geography and psychology of the situation. When the weight leaves his chest, Harry finds that morning has brought the rescue plane to carry him to Nairobi. Helping him aboard, Old Compton says they will have to refuel at Arusha. Everything happens as if it were actually happening—the take-off, the long view of the plain and its moving animals, the hills and forests to the east passing in slow majesty under the belly of the plane—until it dawns on Harry that for some reason they have by-passed Arusha. At first he does not know why. But as the plane emerges from a rain-squall, he suddenly sees ahead of them the square top of Kilimanjaro, 'wide as all the world,' incredibly white in the sun. 'Then he knew that there was where he was going.'

While he was in Africa Hemingway learned that the Masai name for the western summit of Kilimanjaro is Ngaje Ngai, which means 'House of God.' The association between mountainous terrain and the idea of home was, however, already an old one in his mind. He had used it symbolically in the Burguete section of *The Sun Also Rises* and also, far more extensively, in the Abruzzi and the Montreux locale-images of *A Farewell to Arms*. 'I will lift up mine eyes to the hills,' runs the Psalm, 'from whence cometh my help.' But there is no psalm-quoting in the back-to-earth denouement of Hemingway's story. There is only Harry's wife Helen, waking in the middle of the night down in the flat plains-country, far from Kilimanjaro, and calling to her husband who does not answer.

Anyone interested in the methods by which the patterns of experience are translated to the purposes of art should find abundant materials for study in the three stories—nonfiction and fiction—which grew out of Hemingway's African expedition. The foreword to *Green Hills of Africa* contains an implicit question. Given a country as interesting as Africa, and given the shape of a month's hunting action there, and given the author's determination to tell only the truth, the question then becomes this: Can such a book possibly compete on equal terms with a work of the imagination? The answer is that it certainly can *compete*, provided always that the narrative is managed by a very skilled writer who takes both truth (the truth of 'the way it was') and beauty (the extremely careful formal construction) as his watchwords.

Yet the experiment proved also that the narrator who takes no liberties with the actual events of his experience, who tells things exactly as they were, who invents nothing and suppresses nothing important, will place himself at a real disadvantage in the competition. He gives the opposition too large a handicap. Good as *Green Hills of Africa* is in two respects (verisimilitude and architectonics), it lacks the intensities which Hemingway was able to pack into 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,' and it cannot possibly achieve anything like the genuine pathos of 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro.'

Carlos Baker
"The Two African Stories"
Hemingway: The Writer as Artist
(Princeton 1952)

"The Snows' opens with an introductory paragraph whose symbols state the better part of the story's meaning: 'No one has explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude.' This passage can seem enigmatic enough, and has been widely struggled with, but in this context at least one meaning emerges. It is Hemingway himself who 'explains' what the leopard sought at that altitude: the House of God, immortality. The leopard did not quite make the summit, and in his mysterious attempt to reach it perished, but his carcass is dried and frozen: he died in the attempt to save his soul, as all who try it must, but frozen

at that temperature and height the leopard is permanent. He can never spoil, and he presents a perfect contrast to Harry with a gangrened leg, who is very mortal, rotting fast away in the heat of the lowlands.

But Harry is a writer, and if a thing is said perfectly, if it is perfectly immaculate, if it is said 'purely enough,' it cannot spoil, it is frozen, and its author is immortal. At the end of the story Harry 'dreams' of a plane which comes to rescue the writer, and after taking off with the pilot he sees, there, 'unbelievably white in the sun...the square top of Kilimanjaro. And then he knew that there was where he was going.' It was at this precise moment that Hemingway reorganized his forces and left the hero as a failure for what he hoped would be greater things. Leaving it back under the mosquito bar with the woman who had come in some way to stand for all the things which had corrupted it, he here sloughed off his contaminated skin—'somehow he had gotten his leg out and it hung down alongside the cot. The dressings had all come down and she could not look at it'....

As the Macomber story dramatizes the casting off of fear, so 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro' is a fictionalized purge, in this case of a whole bundle of guilty feelings. In this story Hemingway sourly depicted himself (there is no question of his identity here) as an abject failure, dying from an infected scratch five thousand miles from home. The story, interesting in many ways, is probably less tight and dramatic than the Macomber one, but it attempts different and more difficult things. There is a conscious and explicit use of symbolism—which is most unusual with Hemingway—and there is plenty of ammunition for the critics who have attacked the author for his preoccupation with death. That preoccupation is at least ostensibly what the story is about.

There is no question that the protagonist Harry is the Hemingway hero. Harry is a writer as was Nick in 'Fathers and Sons'; he has thought a great deal about death, as Hemingway had done; he thinks of his part in the war against the Austrians, whom Nick fought; he later went skiing with them, as Nick did; he tries to keep himself from thinking, as Nick tried; he had 'sold vitality, in one form or another, all his life,' which is a way of putting what Hemingway did; Africa was 'where he had been happiest,' which the author said of himself in the *Green Hills*; and no one who had read that book, in which the second Mrs. Hemingway figures, could fail to suspect in Harry's wife a less flattering portrait of the same woman. Here, too, is again the man who had 'seen the things that he could ever think of and later still he had seen much worse.'

Harry is very autobiographically drawn: he thinks of that room in Paris (in which Verlaine once lived) where 'he had written the start of all he was to do.' He also identifies himself, to knowing readers of F. Scott Fitzgerald at least, by remembering 'poor Julian' and his romantic awe of the rich. Julian 'had started a story once that began, "The very rich are different from you and me." And someone had said to Julian, "Yes, they have more money." The story was Fitzgerald's 'The Rich Boy,' and it was Hemingway who made the joke....

'The Snows of Kilimanjaro' is widely read, widely anthologized, widely interpreted, and Hollywood paid an all-time high for it. But despite the fact that several versions of what the story is 'about' are meaningful, this is also a special and private thing: a statement by Hemingway of his aesthetic aims and beliefs, and an analysis of his past failures as a writer of prose fiction, as of 1936, a year that was crucial for him. It can be read quite legitimately as a more objective and generalized piece of prose—as, for instance, a story of a writer dying on a safari in Africa, reviewing his past and previewing his future. But for its author it was an exercise in personal and aesthetic hygiene.

In his curious, stubborn way, Hemingway was a writer absolutely and wholeheartedly dedicated to his craft, and—as in the way of serious artists—he dreamed of immortality for some of what he had done; he thought, that is, of writing prose that would be so pure that it could never spoil, that would be permanent. In 1935, in *Green Hills of Africa*, a nonfiction work which supplies considerable background for 'Kilimanjaro,' he spoke of 'how far prose can be carried if anyone is serious enough and has luck.' As for luck, no man knows, but about his prose Hemingway was serious enough... But as ample evidence testifies, 1936 found Hemingway disgusted with himself.

This story itself is eloquent. He had been chasing about Europe and Africa with the very rich (though they 'were dull and they drank too much, or they played too much backgammon'), and drinking all the time

himself ('so much that he blunted the edge of his perceptions'). Seven fallow years had elapsed since he had written a first-rate book, *A Farewell to Arms* ('and you made an attitude that you cared nothing for the work you used to do, now that you could no longer do it'). Two marriages, both discussed in the story, had ended badly; he felt he had been disgracing himself in *Esquire*: 'He had destroyed his talent by not using it, by betrayals of himself and what he believed in, by drinking so much...by laziness, by sloth, and by snobbery...

To make matters worse, 'for years' death had 'obsessed him': now in horror he sees the possibility that it could all end like this—on an idle safari, haggling with a woman. And very little stated purely enough to last always. It is apparent that in 1936 Hemingway made a mighty resolve that he would not, like poor Julian, really be 'wrecked,' that he would achieve permanence despite everything he had done wrong."

Philip Young
Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration
(Penn State 1952, 1966) 74-77

Michael Hollister (2015)