

ANALYSIS

To Have and Have Not (1937)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“Hemingway set down his convictions on the writer in politics in the fall of 1934: ‘A writer can make himself a nice career while he is alive,’ he said, ‘by espousing a political cause, working for it, making a profession of believing in it, and if it wins he will be very well placed.... A man can be a Fascist or a Communist and if his outfit gets in he can get to be an ambassador, or have a million copies of his books printed by the government, or any of the other rewards the boys dream about.... But none of this will help him as a writer unless he finds something new to add to human knowledge while he is writing.”

Ernest Hemingway

“Old Newsmen Writes,” *Esquire* 2 (December 1934) 25-26

quoted by Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist*
(Princeton 1952, 1966) 197

“*To Have and Have Not* (1937) was variously received. Critics had earlier decided that Hemingway was predominantly a stylist; now they had to account for at least a soupcon of social commentary. Alfred Kazin put the matter in a representative way (*NYHTB*, Oct. 17, 1937): the new novel, he said, is ‘feverishly brilliant and flat by turns’.... Generally, critics were very skeptical concerning his intellectual power. But the facts of his being involved and committed didn’t seem in doubt. As a reviewer in *Canadian Forum* (Dec. 1937) put it, ‘Anyway all the Left critics are leaning Right to slap Ernie on the back now he’s in Spain giving someone else besides bulls the run around.’ Malcolm Cowley, who had pretty well taken over the slightly-left-of-center press, had no doubt of the new greatness: Hemingway, he said, is ‘perhaps as great as Mark Twain,’ and *To Have and Have Not* ‘contains some of the best writing he has ever done’ (*NR*, Oct. 20, 1937); he did admit that the book had some weaknesses. There was no doubt that Hemingway had established himself as writer and social activist.... Several critics pointed to a reversal from the ‘separate peace’ position of *Arms*.”

Frederick J. Hoffman

“Ernest Hemingway” [1937]

Sixteen Modern American Authors: A Survey of Research and Criticism
(Duke 1969; Norton 1973) 378-79

“*To Have and Have Not* (1937) was not well received. Almost all of the critics thought it signaled a decline. There was scattered applause for some features: the style, dialogue, and some of the narrative action; and concerted cheering for others: the bar-room scene; the main character, Harry Morgan; the bedroom scene involving Harry and his wife. However, the most serious and extensive concern of the critics was with two elements in the novel which were inter-related, the social theme and the structure.... On the whole, the adverse criticism was accurate in pinpointing the faults of the novel: the confusing shifts in point of view, the eagerness to destroy the rich and the powerful, the irrelevant attacks on literature through Richard Gordon, the writer in the novel. The major shortcoming of the criticism was related to the strong emphasis placed on sociological values by critics who seemed to be seeking accurate reflections of contemporary events. This is most clearly shown in the reluctance to view Harry Morgan as a symbolic figure, and the readiness to judge him in terms of his relevance to actual social problems. Delmore Schwartz’ view that Harry’s morality was inadequate because it could not be associated with a domestic situation is a little like rejecting *Moby Dick* because it is impossible to associate him with deep sea fishing from a rented boat.”

Frank L. Ryan

The Immediate Critical Reception of Ernest Hemingway [1937]

(U Press of America 1980) 25, 27

“Hemingway passed to *For Whom the Bell Tolls* through the anteroom of his worst novel, *To Have and Have Not*, whose central figure is Harry Morgan, Florida adventurer—‘snotty and strong and quick, and like some kind of expensive animal.’ His history, which is a combination of three short stories, one of which has been inflated with largely irrelevant material, is as unsatisfactory aesthetically as morally. It would be too much to say that the reader is never made to feel sympathy for Morgan and his coarse wife, yet when all is said and done, the man is a criminal and a murderer, and Hemingway’s attempts to glorify him into something more are simply a manifestation of the same kind of sentimentality that Thackeray flayed in the popular novels of more than a hundred years ago. As Harry lies dying of his wound, he mutters, ‘No matter how a man alone ain’t got no bloody f---ing chance.’ Hemingway comments, ‘It had taken him a long time to get it out, and it had taken him all his life to learn it.’ If this be ‘social consciousness,’ it seems a curiously unsatisfying variety.”

Edward Wagenknecht
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*
(Holt 1952) 377

“This *Have Not* finds it impossible to make an honest living for himself, and will not dig sewers for a government which pays him less for digging than it takes to feed his wife and children. Harry Morgan, named perhaps for another hard-drinking buccaneer who worked some of the same territory and also evacuated people for high prices (and based on an actual rumrunner named Josey Russell), becomes an outlaw as a result. What had happened was a revolution in Hemingway of equal importance to the one Nick underwent when he renounced the society which was responsible for the pious slaughter of the First World War. By 1937 Ernest Hemingway had re-embraced the society he had quit some twenty years before, and was back in another ‘war for democracy.’

It was not easy to plot the course of this rough circle, for although it is not exactly unique in the history of the developments of contemporary writers Hemingway came home from lands farther off than most, and he had been away longer. By 1936 his friend John Dos Passos (who had been an ‘expatriate’ and had written an anti-war novel and a book on Spain in his earlier days) had published all three volumes of *U.S.A.* We do know, however, what *To Have and Have Not* means in the context of its author’s development, and we know a little about how the meaning was arrived at.

The novel is a book with a ‘message,’ and that message is stated by the author in one sentence. It is a sentence which ‘had taken him a long time to get out,’ and which ‘had taken him all of his life to learn.’ It is a deathbed conversion; the words are Harry’s last on earth: ‘No matter how a man alone ain’t got no bloody f---ing chance.’ The conflicts and anguish involved in turning from an America where everyone was ‘quitting work to go on relief,’ to one where some kind of cooperative society seemed clearly the implicit answer, can only be guessed at, though it is pretty certain that the purge of ‘Kilimanjaro’ was a part of the transformation. So, without doubt, was the slaughter of hundreds of U.S. Army veterans left by their government to perish in a Florida hurricane in 1935, which Hemingway reported with savage indignation for the communist *New Masses*.

What we also know is that the novel was started as early as 1933. When, early in 1937, Hemingway went to Spain to report Loyalist news of the Spanish Civil War, a first draft of the book (which was much longer than the one we have) was completed. It ended in utter discouragement. When the author returned to this country later that year he was ardently pro-Loyalist; he destroyed a good deal of the novel and changed the ending. Doubtless Morgan’s speech, Hemingway’s Manifesto, was written at that time, too, and the fact that this concluding message does not grow very inevitably out of the action is further ground for such a guess. Hemingway broke the back of the book, and must very nearly have broken his own.

To Have and Have Not is an anomaly in the development of Hemingway’s prose, for it is one of his very few full-length works in which the hero does not appear. Although Morgan has a very few points of resemblance to the hero, and is usually mistaken for him, he is really not our man. He had neither the background, the troubles nor the personality. But all the same, we have seen the like of him before: he is the man who teaches the hero. He is the prizefighter, the bullfighter, the gambler, the hunting guide, who appears always to illustrate something important that the hero must know, and knows in his next

appearance. But this time it is not so much the necessity for having the code that he primarily illustrates, although he has it and the book is packed with praise for his *cojones*. This time it is that human beings cannot strike out alone with impunity; they must cooperate. [As Melville says in *Moby-Dick*]

The novel is a very uneven one and it is more significant for the way it marks this revolution in the course of the author's thinking than for anything else. There are some excellent scenes, like the one of a brawl in a barroom, but there are some poor ones, too.... The contrast between the Haves and the Have Nots in the novel, which is really structure and support for the whole book and message, is unconvincing. The basis of the superiority of the Nots lies chiefly in the Morgans' bedroom talent, and while there can be no objection to the notion that Harry and his wife perform more admirably than, say, the solitary rich girl who masturbates, it must at the same time be conceded that a large part of the Morgans' superiority is directly attributable to the somewhat chance fact that he has only a stub for one arm.

On the other hand, however, there is a certain catharsis, doubtless written before the conversion in Spain, for the accumulative disgust which the various scenes among the Haves build up. This is the savage rhetoric with which Richard Gordon's wife (he is a successful novelist in the book) denounces her husband... Just how all these things lead to Harry's final pronouncement is...not skillfully transacted. Nor are the Johnny-come-lately explanations of how the Haves got their money very impressive. Actually, if the author could have assembled his thousands of readers in one place and said, 'Look, I was wrong. From now on things will be different,' he would have accomplished the biggest part of what his novel accomplished....

The book is fully enrolled in the primitive school which was founded by Frank Norris and Jack London.... Morgan is the son of [Wolf] Larson...a virile, brutal individualist whose survival-of-the-fittest ethics are, like Harry's the interest of the plot.... Hemingway's book is in the main line of development of one of our minor literary traditions, in which naturalism goes primitive with a Nietzschean morality in Norris, and is tested and found wanting by London. Hemingway simply brought all of this into the line of his development, and redid it for himself with the settings, characters, meanings and wild brutalities of the prototypes. He also did it better. His novel is a weak one, for him, but nothing makes it look so good as to place it in the company of its progenitors."

Philip Young
Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration
(Penn State 1952, 1966) 98-102, 199-200

"*To Have and Have Not* is generally considered an inferior work, although as one of Hemingway's five full-length novels it is nevertheless a book of importance. Its hero Harry Morgan, cynical, defiant, and independent, is the owner of a Key West sport-fishing boat. As the novel opens Morgan, trusting no one and living shrewdly through his own wiles, is making his living by crossing to Havana with the boat and chartering it to wealthy American sport fishermen. When one of these sportsmen cheats him out of his charter-fee he is left destitute, and is forced to accept a job smuggling Chinese to Florida. He accepts the money for this job and then cynically puts his passengers ashore again in Cuba, although he is forced to murder a man to accomplish this. In the second part of the novel, several months later, he is shot while running liquor from Cuba in his boat; the boat is confiscated and Harry loses his arm.

In the third section, having recovered from his wounds and his amputation, he is propositioned by a band of Cuban revolutionaries—actually little more than gangsters—who want him to smuggle them back into their country. This job is more complicated; it involves stealing his boat back from the officials who have seized it. He manages to steal the boat and get away with the Cubans, only to realize when they murder his mate that they have no intention of paying for their passage and will probably murder him when they get within sight of Cuba. With great ingenuity and courage he manages to catch the Cubans off guard and kill them with their own weapons, but he is mortally wounded in doing so. When he is found by the Coast Guard he has just enough strength to speak the message it has taken him all his life to learn: 'No matter how a man alone ain't got no...chance.' Thus the ethical theme of this novel anticipates that of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: that man cannot stand alone, that only in union with other men can he find the strength to stand up to evil. Harry, cynical, confused, and lacking in moral conscience, is nevertheless no villain; he is simply not very wise, and learns his wisdom when it is too late. A sub-plot involves a satire

on retired business-men, professors, would-be writers, and other members of the leisure class commonly found in resorts like Key West.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 158-59

“Harry Morgan, a native of Key West, is forced by the depression to turn to smuggling, bootlegging, and finally to helping four Cuban revolutionaries escape. Fatally wounded in a fight, Morgan is picked up by the Coast Guard and dies, gasping, ‘One man alone ain’t got...no chance.’ In *Ernest Hemingway* (1952), Philip Young writes, ‘The contrast between the Haves and the Have Nots...is unconvincing.’ But the author’s new concern with social problems presaged *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940).”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 1144

“What is most valid in *To Have and Have Not* is the idea...that in an atmosphere (here revolutionary Cuba) in which man has been set against man, in which it is always a question whether your companion is not preparing to cut your throat, the most sturdy and straightforward American will turn suspicious and cruel. Harry Morgan is made to realize as he dies that to fight this bad world alone is hopeless. Again Hemingway, with his barometric accuracy, has rendered a moral atmosphere that was prevalent at the moment he was writing—a moment when social relations were subjected to severe tensions, when they seemed sometimes already disintegrating....

Hemingway had not himself particularly labored this moral of individualism *versus* solidarity, but the critics of the Left labored it for him and received his least creditable piece of fiction as the delivery of a new revelation.... Later he jibed at the literary radicals, who talked but couldn’t take it; and one finds even in *To Have and Have Not* a crack about a ‘highly paid Hollywood director, whose brain is in the process of outlasting his liver so that he will end up calling himself a Communist, to save his soul’.”

Edmund Wilson
“Hemingway: Gauge of Morale”
The Wound and the Bow
(Oxford/Galaxy 1965) 187-88

“During the 1930s a dream that haunted many was of joining forces with all the dispossessed and of moving forward shoulder to shoulder into a brighter future. Even Hemingway shared the dream for a time. *To Have and Have Not*, published during the Spanish Civil War, has a hero who lives by his own law, but his dying words are ‘No matter how a man alone ain’t got no bloody fucking chance.’ ‘It had taken him a long time to get it out,’ Hemingway adds in his own voice, ‘and it had taken him all of his life to learn it.’ Steinbeck, a younger man, was more affirmative in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).”

Malcolm Cowley
A Second Flowering: Works and Days of the Lost Generation
(1974; Penguin 1980) 106-07

“*To Have and Have Not* consists of two loosely interwoven plots that align the contrast between socioeconomic classes with a contrast between marital situations. The first plot depicts the hard-boiled, violent world of Harry Morgan and his wife Marie; the second shows the unhappy lives and marital infidelities of the writer Richard Gordon, his wife Helen, and their wealthy friends. Harry Morgan enjoys a satisfactory if carnal relationship with his wife. Harry, who has only his ‘*cajones* to peddle,’ sinks hopelessly into a life of crime, but he knows that he is doing it to support a wife who without question adores him. At forty-five, Marie is an aging, ‘heavy-set, big, blue-eyed woman, with bleached-blond hair’ (176), but Harry tells her that she is ‘better’ than anyone else. Indeed Marie is an exceptional woman, loving and yet strong enough to grieve deeply for the death of Harry without being crushed by it. Marie is very much a person of her own who can give without losing herself.

Although we may be offended by the brutish features of this working-class couple, we see that their relationship is presented as their refuge in a hostile, fallen world. In the environment of romanticized poverty, Harry and Marie have little else but each other. They are social outsiders who, in an admittedly more vulgar and fierce way than Frederic and Catherine (*FTA*), have created for themselves on the margins of society a 'fine life' which, of course, cannot last. By contrast, the rich fail in their relationships, and Hemingway exposes the sordidness of their marital and extramarital affairs. Nevertheless, a wide range of narrative techniques—including interior monologues (242-46, 257-62) and a fiery feminist speech (185-86)—provides insights into the different perspectives of all the characters, but especially those of the women (Nolan).

More than any other Hemingway novel, *To Have and Have Not* shows the author's awareness that perspective is everything. Whatever the blind spots in Hemingway's perception of women, he was not utterly unaware of them. In an ironically amusing passage, the writer Richard Gordon, after a glimpse of Marie Morgan, assumes that he has 'seen, in a flash of perception, the whole inner life of that type of woman' (177). We know, however, that Gordon's speculations about her life are absolutely wrong. Though Gordon is sometimes seen as a caricature of the writer John Dos Passos, the passage may also be read as Hemingway's own acknowledgement of the difficulties writes encounter when they create characters of the opposite sex."

Rena Sanderson
"Hemingway and Gender History"
The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway, ed. Scott Donaldson
(Cambridge U 1996) 185-86

"In *To Have and Have Not* it is the 1933 revolution in Cuba against dictator Gerardo Machado, echoing 1930s leftism in the United States, that provides the background for Harry Morgan's amoral strivings. His double dealing in the smuggling of booze and illegal immigrants between Cuba and Key West leads to his fatal wounding and to his less than revolutionary realization that 'a man alone ain't got no blood fucking chance' (225). The true love offered by Harry's wife, the rotund and sometimes bleached-blond Marie, is juxtaposed to the sterile relationships of the idle rich and members of the comfortable left wing. Marie offers Harry a relationship more authentic and more loving, but her love cannot save Harry. She merely can mourn alone, feeling 'empty like an empty house' and unable even to bring herself to go to Harry's funeral (257)."

Frederic J. Svoboda
"The Great Themes in Hemingway"
A Historical Guide to Ernest Hemingway, ed. Linda Wagner-Martin
(Oxford 2000) 160

Michael Hollister (2015)