

ANALYSIS

Stegner and Hemingway

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

Joseph M. Flora

“Stegner’s first short story collection in accumulative force bears striking likenesses to Hemingway’s first major collection, *In Our Time* (1925).... To take an obvious instance, ‘The City of the Living,’ the final story of Stegner’s *Collected Stories*...shares a good deal with Hemingway’s ‘A Day’s Wait.’ Both stories depend on an international contrast; in both an American father keeps vigil over a son with fever. In Hemingway’s story, the boy thinks he will die. In Stegner’s, the father believes that the typhoid fever will take his son. There is learning for both fathers, and probably for both sons--though Stegner is not as concerned with the son’s personality as with the father’s. Waiting is the significant action of both stories. With Stegner, as with Hemingway, the short story often emphasized quiet moments, internal rather than external action.

Comparison between Stegner’s short stories and Hemingway’s is almost inevitable because Stegner is like Hemingway in making father-son relationships a favored focus. ‘A Day’s Wait’ and ‘The City of the Living’ are among the instances of stories from the father’s perspective. In Hemingway’s *In Our Time* and in Stegner’s *The Women on the Wall* the reader approaches father-son pairings from the son’s perspective. Indeed, both writers continued to favor this angle of vision for some time, as later collections of both authors reveal. Both writers had to probe in fictional guise their own relationships with their fathers before they could treat their relationship with their own sons....

Although Hemingway’s Nick seemed to resist the novel form, Stegner’s Bruce [Mason] made his way into stories less minimalist in technique that Hemingway’s usually are...and the chronicle of Bruce and his family provided the basis for the novel that most critics consider Stegner’s first major work. From the start, Bruce belonged with such apprenticeship heroes as Wolfe’s Eugene Gant as well as with Nick. Primarily, however, it is Bruce in his more youthful stages that puts us in mind of Nick Adams--especially as Stegner defines him as the son of Bo and Elsa Mason. Bruce’s mother (not called by name in the stories) is long suffering and loving. Were her husband more in tune with her longings, she might have counted herself happy in the rigors of the demands of her life on the Saskatchewan frontier. As it is, however, a great gulf between them is often evident. Stegner emphasizes their differences in ‘Butcher Bird,’ which is ‘The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife’ [Hemingway] of *The Women on the Wall*. A gun is a prominent symbol in both stories, the difference being that Bruce’s mother not only sees its symbolic importance, but she is able to articulate something important about her husband: ‘The minute you get a gun in your hand you start feeling better,’ she said. ‘It’s just a shame you weren’t born fifty years sooner.’ Too much of the frontier is gone for the likes of a Bo Mason, and for Dr. Adams, too--though Mrs. Adams is too self-engrossed to see that reality.

Stegner painted Bruce’s parents on a broad canvas, and he could return to both of them, with equal ease. Bo is the more complex character of the parents, freer than Dr. Adams to give vent to the dark side of his character. Stegner portrays that dark side in ‘Goin to Town,’ a story set on a Fourth of July. (It may be profitably set next to Hemingway’s Fourth of July story, ‘Ten Indians.’) Even while portraying the Masons in the short story form, Stegner realized that he needed numerous angles and situations to delineate Bruce’s heritage. Often, of course, Bruce is like Nick--stunned by the complexities of adult life around him, trying to make sense of an existence where cruelty and death are always lying in wait. Stegner’s stories about Bruce reveal a Stegner presenting both parents as round characters (revealing strengths and weaknesses of both).... Stegner’s approach to his fiction is, furthermore, like Hemingway’s in its dominant biographical impulse--an impulse Stegner frankly acknowledges....

Just as Hemingway maintained to Dos Passos that there was a satisfying unity to *In Our Time*, Stegner seems to have found something like that unity for *The Women on the Wall*.... Stegner, like Hemingway, strives in his short stories for the suggestive.... That collection...explores most of the basic concerns of *In Our Time*--innocence, loss of innocence, survival, bravery and cowardice, travel, memory. As I have argued, Stegner uses disjunctiveness of placement to affect the way we experience those themes. I do not insist that he had Hemingway's book consciously in mind (though as a teacher and student of the short story, Stegner had certainly paid attention to Hemingway's work), but his interest in rendering his own experience quite naturally made his collection another depiction of life 'in our time'....

For almost all of the stories written in the 1940s, the war under scrutiny, not surprisingly, is World War II. 'The Berry Patch,' 'The Women on the Wall,' and 'The Volcano' are set during the actual years of the war. 'The View from the Balcony' portrays the lives of graduate students who have just returned from that war, the narrative voice being that of an Englishwoman who had survived Hitler's bombs. The Bruce stories, on the other hand, evoke the horrors of World War I. In 'Butcher Bird' Mr. Garfield, a transplanted Englishman, is so conscious of the trench warfare then in progress that he no longer wishes to keep his gun. When he gives it to Bruce, he asks that Bruce not use the gun on nonpredatory animals. Bruce's father, not imaginatively involved with the Great War, has nothing but contempt for Mr. Garfield, and shoots a sparrow with Bruce's gun to protest what he sees as Garfield's effeminacy. Thus, *The Women on the Wall* interweaves stories that reveal aspects of both world wars.... 'The Volcano' [is] perhaps the most Hemingwayesque story of the collection....

In many of the stories of *The Women on the Wall* Stegner keeps his focus on the shocked innocence of a young male protagonist, although that was not his focus in the war stories. (The startled young male was central to many of Hemingway's stories.) But Stegner has created memorable stories about other aspects of war and its aftermath, the sensibilities of women important in several of them. *The Women on the Wall* has considerable power as a study of various faces of war. As such it may appropriately be set next to *In Our Time*. Although Stegner had learned the lessons of disjunctiveness and the modernistic methods that *In Our Time* demonstrated, he knew also that Hemingway's book had not developed in a vacuum. Hemingway's models were Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) and Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919).

By placing 'The Sweetness of the Twisted Apples' last in *The Women on the Wall*, Stegner reminded his readers of Anderson's pivotal role in the new freedom Anderson had pioneered for the American short story and the possibilities for books of linked short stories that used distinctiveness as a device, collections that created a unity other than progressive narration. Stegner's title echoes a key line from Anderson's story 'Paper Pills' from *Winesburg*.... (Like Anderson, Stegner presented many sympathetic portraits of women in his first collection.) But because of the Bruce stories and the constant reminders of the world wars, *In Our Time* remains the more natural analog to Stegner's first collection.

Although *The Women on the Wall* was Stegner's first collection of stories, it was his ninth book.... At the time of its publication, Stegner was an established author, usually ranked among his country's important writers.... Stegner's course is the reverse of Hemingway's, for he was an established writer in the novel before his first short story collection came into being.... This publishing history emphasizes that the short story was more essential to Hemingway than to Stegner."

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