

ANALYSIS

“Up in Michigan” (1921)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

One of the first stories Hemingway ever wrote contradicts the stereotype of him by dramatizing the perspective of a vulnerable girl and affirming her character while criticizing an insensitive selfish male. The stereotype prevailed nevertheless, no matter what he wrote.

“Up in Michigan” originated after Hemingway returned home from World War I and had been rejected by the nurse he fell in love with in an Italian hospital. Up in the wilds of northern Michigan at Horton’s Bay, while working in a potato harvest, he went out strolling in the evenings with a waitress described as “pretty and forward” by biographer Carlos Baker, who says: “One night their stroll ended in a mutual seduction on the chilly planking of the dock... ‘Up in Michigan’...dealt so frankly and graphically with sexual intercourse that he had difficulty in getting it published in the United States.” For that reason it was excluded from *In Our Time* (1925).

The story and the title polarize the man and the girl: He is “up” in a phallic sense, she is “up” in a spiritual sense. The title may also be a sardonic allusion to a line in a popular song of the day: “How I’d like to be again / Way up in Michigan.” Jim Gilmore is a blacksmith, an occupation associated with dirt, horses and fire. At the same time, having come down from Canada associates him with cold. He is both hot and cold to the vulnerable girl Liz Coates. Ironically, Jim embodies the common traits that radical Feminists have attributed to all males, especially Hemingway.

The name Smith is so common it is used by Realists to represent the commonplace. “Mrs. Smith, who was a very large clean woman, said Liz Coates was the neatest girl she’d ever seen.” Cleanliness and neatness connote moral virtues. Jim is a black-*smith*, suggesting that he represents the dark physical side of the commonplace: His point of view is limited mostly to sensations: “Liz had good legs” and is clean and neat. “He liked her face because it was so jolly but he never thought about her.” In contrast, “Liz liked Jim very much.” She likes his looks more than he likes hers. Variations of the word *liked* occur 9 times in the third paragraph expressing her infatuation. Her youth, innocence and naivete are rendered by repetition in the style, by short simple sentences with the same conventional syntax, and by vagueness, as in “She liked it about his mustache.” That her increasing attraction to Jim is becoming physical is conveyed when she is watching him wash up: “One day she found that she liked” the black hair on his arms in contrast to their naked whiteness above the tanned line. “Liking that made her feel funny.”

Like the name Smith, the landscape represents the world in general: farming country, a forest, a church, and a school. That the church is Methodist makes the place more specifically American. “The blacksmith shop was painted red and faced the school.” Black and red and the blacksmith shop opposite the school represent polarities in real life that are opposite to what is taught in school. The story is in the Realist tradition of exposing romantic illusion and contrasting innocence with experience.

Liz is now thinking about Jim Gilmore “all the time,” whereas he “didn’t seem to notice her much.” He goes fishing—“*Gil*-more”—and hunting, common male pursuits comparable in his values to pursuing a female. Hemingway studied English Renaissance literature in high school, read it all his life and quoted from it in some of his titles. In that literature deer hunting is a metaphor of sexual pursuit. While Jim is gone deer hunting Liz feels awful and “couldn’t sleep well from thinking about him but she discovered it was fun to think about him too. If she let herself go it was better.” Her infatuation feels both awful and fun. Whether it is better to “let herself go” with Jim is the question she decides in the affirmative. Later she may feel differently, but the story implies that it is better to experience a “Fall” and learn from it than to remain naïve and vulnerable. Moreover, what happens is virtually inevitable. The sense of biological determinism is a characteristic of Naturalism. That we must all lose our innocence sooner or later is a theme throughout

Hemingway, most obvious in the unfinished manuscript of *The Garden of Eden* (1986). Another ongoing theme also expressed in this early story about feeling up is the possibility of transcending a defeat or loss with a spiritual victory.

In her romantic illusion “it seemed as though everything would be all right when he came.” Jim has grown a beard and Liz has grown romantic expectations. She expected “something” would happen when he returned, but “Nothing had happened.” Her disillusionment here prefigures her feelings at the end of the story. When she asks Jim if he shot the buck in the wagon, his evident pleasure in a conquest prefigures his probable satisfaction after having sex with Liz on the dock: “Yeah. Ain’t it a beauty?” The parallel is implied again when before dinner the three men drink whiskey from a jug they had taken with them on the hunting trip: “Tastes good to a man.” “Nothing like it this time of year for what ails you.”

After dinner Liz sits in the kitchen pretending to read—evoking the contrast of school and blacksmith, conventional knowledge and experience in real life. She sits near the stove for warmth and she wanted to see Jim look at her when he came out “so she could take the way he looked up to bed with her.” When he does come in, he approaches her tipsy from whiskey and fondles her breasts. She is frightened but does not resist him, naively believing that he feels the same way about her, the way she will dream about him when she goes up to bed. She allows him to kiss her and her sensations compare to those she has later when she “lets herself go” down on the dock—“sharp, aching, hurting.” Yet she goes along with Jim outside for a walk into the dark because “she wanted it now.”

When she takes her coat off the peg we may be reminded that her name is Coates. “A steep sandy road ran down the hill to the bay.” In contrast to what her dreams would have been if she had gone up to her bedroom instead, going downhill in the dark with Jim he kisses her repeatedly but “There was no moon”—no romance. “It was cold but Liz was hot all over from being with Jim.” She expects and wants to make love: “She was very frightened and didn’t know how he was going to go about things but she snuggled close to him.” Jim proceeds until as if by conditioned reflex as a chaste girl, she finally resists by saying “Don’t” and “You mustn’t.” Too late. “Neither Jim nor Jim’s big hand paid any attention to her.... She was frightened but she wanted it. She had to have it but it frightened her.”

She continues to verbalize resistance but her words are contradicted by her yielding. Her ambivalence is natural. The planks are “hemlock,” traditionally alluding to death, as in the case of the philosopher Socrates who was condemned for corrupting the young. In an ironic inversion, Jim is far from a philosopher and he is truly inclined to corrupt the young. He kills the infatuation of young Liz, who succumbs to the initiation but resists corruption. The death of Liz’s innocence to the blacksmith is emphasized by the Realism detailing her pain and discomfort as she “worked her way out from under him.” Now she rises above him. “He wouldn’t move,” the drunken lout. “She lifted his head a little and shook it,” trying to wake him up to her needs, but the common man is unconscious. The tone of this moment blends pathos with satire in the manner of Mark Twain.

Feminists have said that Liz should have kicked his butt into the bay and filed a charge of rape. In contrast, Liz accepts responsibility for her own actions and does not blame the man. “Liz leaned over and kissed his cheek.” She is not angry or vindictive, she is disillusioned. “Liz started to cry” as a mist comes up from the bay, making the personal a part of the larger natural order in which moods are transitory. She goes back and tries again to wake him up, pleading to no avail. In fact, Jim “curled a little tighter” into himself. Then Liz transcends Nature. She transcends the natural reaction of many women in such a situation through empathy: “Liz took off her coat and leaned over and covered him with it. She tucked it around him neatly and carefully.” Though she is cold, she tries to warm Jim. Ironically, just when “everything felt gone,” Liz shows how much she possesses in spirit. She is the first character in Hemingway to display “grace under pressure”—she is the first exemplar of his credo.

According to a legend of the English Renaissance, Sir Walter Raleigh once covered a mud puddle with his coat for Queen Elizabeth to step upon in crossing a street. The act became an emblem of the traditional chivalry that later informed Victorianism, retaining the connotation of woman as a queen, as expressed by Margaret Fuller, Emily Dickinson and other Victorian women. Just as Jim inverts Socrates, Elizabeth *Coates* inverts the chivalric tradition since Queen Elizabeth by taking the male role, but when she covers

dirty Jim with her coat she is casting him as the mud puddle. Liz does not step on him like a queen or a Feminist, instead she climbs above him.

It may seem that Jim has gotten away with something, but consider: (1) he will have to return her coat to Liz in the morning; (2) when he does this he may be observed, raising questions in the small town; (3) he will have to face Liz every day in the presence of the Smiths; (4) he will not know whether Liz will tell the Smiths what happened; (5) if she does tell them he will be blamed, which could result in his eviction and ruin his blacksmith business; and (6) Mrs. Smith is a “very large clean woman.”

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