Hemingway on PBS: The American writer who sought “the truest sentence that you know”

David Walsh
10 April 2021

Hemingway, a documentary series by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, premiered on PBS April 5. Its three parts, each approximately two hours, are now available online. It is eminently worth watching.

Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961) was one of the most important American novelists and short-story writers of the 20th century, and a literary figure with an immense global influence and following.

He is best known for his three most significant novels, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), as well as innumerable and often scintillating short stories and nonfiction works. Hemingway wrote about the two world wars and the Spanish Civil War. He also wrote about love affairs, personal betrayal and suicide, as well as bullfighting, big-game hunting and deep-sea fishing.

In the wake of the slaughter of the First World War, which he briefly but nearly fatally experienced first-hand, Hemingway developed a terse, compact and direct writing style. He hoped to eliminate what was ornamental and inessential, and thus false, from his language. The effort had a both moral and political dimension to it, bound up as it undoubtedly was with revulsion against the old order responsible for the savage conflict and with the wave of revolutions that overturned empires and in Russia, in October 1917, the capitalist system itself.

There are enormously attractive and enduring features of Hemingway’s body of work (he wrote some of the most beautiful prose in the English language), as well as less attractive and less enduring features. It is not accidental that the first two hours of the Burns-Novick series are its most compelling and intriguing. A persuasive case can be made that the writer did his most authentic and purposeful work in the first decade of his career, in his Michigan and European short stories and his first two novels.

As the series itself suggests, Hemingway was damaged by his arrival as a “celebrity” in the 1930s, by the solidifying and fixing at the same time of the two-fisted, brawny “Hemingway personality,” a man rushing—for unclear reasons—from one near-death encounter to the next. The writer, a deeply sensitive and shy man, initially built that public personality in part, it would seem, out of the need to protect himself from the world and how it was suffering and how it hurt him. Unfortunately, if one takes on such a posture long enough, one tends to become it. When Hemingway later turned to “political” matters in the late 1930s, his “tough-guy” personality became anchored, at least temporarily, in quasi-Stalinist *realpolitik*, a location “from whose bourn no traveller” easily or fully returns.

If Hemingway ultimately falls below Theodore Dreiser and F. Scott Fitzgerald in one’s estimation, it has something to do with a less critical attitude toward American society, although he was undoubtedly critical of it, and a less critical attitude toward his own situation and trajectory, although he could be honest about that at times too.

His famed style played a role as well. Form is not a passive container for content. To a certain extent, Hemingway trapped himself in a corner with his short, declarative sentences and his nearly relentless stoicism (whereas the real man wallowed in grudges, complaints and even self-pity). When it came time to expand, to open up his approach and let in more of the world, including its great, historic tragedies, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, for instance, the results were not entirely happy. And that was his last major social-aesthetic experiment.

Hemingway asserted in his memoir, *A Moveable Feast* (published posthumously in 1964), that writing “the truest sentence that you know” and going “from there” solved any paralyzing dilemmas he faced in the early days of his writing career. Of course, a particular sentence is only true to the extent that it belongs to or reflects the truth of a larger, preconceived artistic and social idea. Whether a given author is fully conscious of it or not, he or she is subordinating the selection of words and sentences to that idea—although those words and sentences may, in turn, act upon the overriding conception and alter it. In his later, postwar books, Hemingway continued at times to turn out *individually* true sentences, but they added up to false or often trivial works because the underlying notions no longer corresponded meaningfully to the character of the epoch.

The moral-artistic crusade that Hemingway launched in the early 1920s, rooted in a belief that personal courage and strength lay at the heart of accomplishing anything in the world, ultimately ran up against the objectively thorny political problems of the 1930s and 1940s, and inevitably proved inadequate. Nonetheless, at his bravest and most realistic, Hemingway cut through mystification and euphemism in a pioneering fashion and contributed toward humanity seeing itself as it really was.

The Burns-Novick series is divided into three episodes, “A Writer (1899–1929),” “The Avatar (1929–1944)” and “The Blank Page (1944–1961).” The miniseries, narrated by actor Peter Coyote, systematically works through the course of Hemingway’s life and career, making use of photographs and film clips, interspersed with comments from numerous academics, biographers and writers, including short story writer and novelist Tobias Wolff, Irish novelist and memoirist Edna O’Brien and Peruvian novelist and politician Mario Vargas Llosa. Unfortunately, comments by the late Sen. John McCain also make their inappropriate way into the series.

The observations of the more than 15 interviewees in *Hemingway* range from the acute to the banal, but one has to commend Burns and Novick in general for their refusal to kowtow to the prevailing obsession with gender and race, and malicious, subjective gossip. Whether one subscribes to all their judgments or not, the co-directors, first and foremost, seriously treat Hemingway’s contributions *as an artist*, as someone who importantly responded to life and society, and do not become overly ensnared by his

personal dramas and failings—although those are not ignored. One hopes, indeed, that *Hemingway* will encourage viewers to turn to the author's works.

Jeff Daniels voices Hemingway, with Keri Russell (Hadley Richardson), Patricia Clarkson (Pauline Pfeiffer), Meryl Streep (Martha Gellhorn) and Mary Louise Parker (Mary Welsh) as his four wives.

The creators conscientiously attempt to examine Hemingway's art and personality in their contradictoriness. In regard to the traumas of the 1930s and 1940s, one might say that the Burns-Novick series encounters some of the same difficulties as Hemingway did. No doubt the writer-directors have their own limitations and blind spots, but much of the PBS film's predicament in trying to depict the period has broader, more generalized sources: the complexity of the events and the degree to which they are still poorly understood 70, 80 and 90 years later.

One especially salient fact certainly does come across in *Hemingway*, that the writer was intensely attuned to social and political life and "the moral atmosphere of the time, as it is felt at the roots of human relations, with a sensitivity almost unrivalled," in critic Edmund Wilson's eloquent phrase. This is the case apart from the question as to whether he responded valuably or in a principled manner to every pressure of that atmosphere.

Indeed, that Hemingway failed to grasp the essence of a number of strategic experiences, and made serious blunders, tended to *heighten* and not lessen the degree to which he ultimately felt or even absorbed physically, as it were, a portion of the immense violence and suffering bound up with the events of the mid-20th century. It seems reasonable to suggest, on the basis of the six-hour film alone, that the accumulating blows and defeats, only very partially comprehended, contributed to his early, tragic death, by suicide, in July 1961.

The first episode grapples with Hemingway's childhood, adolescence, his experiences in World War I and the first phase of his writing career in the 1920s, predominantly in Europe.

Hemingway was born in the upright Chicago suburb of Oak Park, Illinois. His mother was a cultured woman and aspiring vocalist, to whom her eldest son was strongly drawn and by whom he also felt oppressed, as the PBS series indicates. Their relationship was a contentious one, and no doubt had longer-term psychic consequences. His father, a doctor, suffered from depression and would eventually kill himself in 1928.

At 18, during the First World War, Hemingway signed on to be a Red Cross ambulance driver in Italy. Soon after he arrived, he was seriously wounded by an Austrian mortar shell, hit by 220 shards of shrapnel. Hemingway lay in a Milan hospital bed, uncertain whether he would lose one or both legs. Having spent six months in hospital and "deeply affected by the war," as one of the interviewees observes, he returned to the US in 1919.

Three years later, now married and having arranged a job as a foreign correspondent for the *Toronto Star*, Hemingway and his new wife, Hadley Richardson, moved to Paris, the intellectual and artistic capital of the decade. He quickly fell in with artistic circles there, encountering Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald and others. As part of his work for the *Star*, Hemingway traveled widely in Europe, covering wars and international conferences, interviewing Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.

Hemingway's first book, *Three Stories and Ten Poems*, was published in Paris in 1923. It contains what was a controversial piece at the time, "Up in Michigan." The eight-page story, set in northern Michigan, where the Hemingway family had a cottage and spent every summer, describes a sexual encounter between a coarse blacksmith and a girl who works as a waitress.

Edna O'Brien makes the point that the story refutes Hemingway's "detractors" who claim that he "didn't understand women and women's emotions." In general, Daniels' reading of passages from Hemingway's works," especially in the first episode (including also "Indian Camp" and "Big Two-Hearted River"), is intensely moving and evocative.

Hemingway's first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, concerns a group of expatriate Americans and Britons, residing in Paris, who travel to Pamplona, Spain, for the running of the bulls and the bullfighting. The various men and women belong to what had become known as the Lost Generation, those scarred and disoriented by the world war. As the title suggests, however, all is not lost, humanity is resilient, although the characters are battered and disillusioned.

The beautifully composed novel, as a commentator points out in the Burns-Novick series, concludes on a disturbing, questioning note:

"Oh, Jake," Brett said, "we could have had such a damned good time together."

Ahead was a mounted policeman in khaki directing traffic. He raised his baton. The car slowed suddenly pressing Brett against me.

"Yes," I said. "Isn't it pretty to think so?"

Episode 1 of *Hemingway* also deals with the end of the writer's first marriage, his second one to Pauline Pfeiffer, a wealthy American woman from Arkansas, his initial commercial and critical successes and the writing of remarkable stories such as "Hills Like White Elephants." In that brief work, mostly dialogue, an American man pressures his female companion while they wait at a small Spanish train station to have an "operation," presumably an abortion. At one point, she simply says to him, "Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?"

Hemingway's second novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, published in 1929, saw him return to the subject of World War I. Set in northern Italy, the story centers on an American ambulance driver, who falls in love with a British nurse. Eventually, after many disasters related to the war, including his serious wounding, the lovers escape to Switzerland. Tragically, the woman dies in childbirth, along with her baby. Without ever offering a didactic statement, the novel presents the cruelty and madness of the world war, whose horrors fall almost entirely on the heads of ordinary soldiers, civilians, refugees. Those in charge are stupid and brutal. The book was a great critical and popular success.

In a number of ways, the second and third episodes, covering Hemingway's writing and activity during the 1930s, the Spanish Civil War and World War II, along with his physical and mental decline in the 1950s, are more problematic and more painful to watch, and even at times tedious, for some of the reasons mentioned above.

Various commentators in *Hemingway* point to the increasing weight of the writer's fame in the 1930s, to the emergence of the "legendary Hemingway," which threatened to consume him.

Now based in Key West, Florida, flush with money, Hemingway is watching the bullfights again or off to Africa to hunt game. He writes about such things in unsatisfying works like *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) and *Green Hills of Africa* (1935). Meanwhile, the Great Depression grinds down the population and Stalinist critics such as Granville Hicks deplore his apparent lack of commitment.

In fact, the burst of slightly hysterical outdoor activity may well have been Hemingway's initial, overwhelmed response to the economic hardships and the political tragedies in Europe. Edmund Wilson observed that while in the previous decade, the writer had tried to express his disquiet, and had been "undruggable," now what had set in was "a deliberate self-drugging."

By 1937, however, "the blast of the social issue" rushed into the vacuum. Hemingway produced a not very good "proletarian novel," *To Have and Have Not*, about an individualistic fisherman-smuggler who ends up dying in a heroic manner. (The novel did form the basis of two very good films, Howard Hawks' 1944 film with the same title and Michael Curtiz' *The Breaking Point* in 1950).

Moreover, in the face of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July

1936, Hemingway declared, “I have to go to Spain.” He went there as a correspondent for the North American Newspaper Alliance (NANA). In Madrid, he met fellow correspondent Martha Gellhorn, with whom he carried on an affair and to whom he was later married, for a third time.

The Burns-Novick series points to the role of Stalin and the GPU in Spain, rounding up and murdering anarchists, socialists and “Trotskyites,” although it fails to place the vicious repression in the context of the Stalinists’ counter-revolutionary functioning during the civil war as a whole, as a force for bourgeois law and order suppressing every attempt by the Spanish workers to carry out a revolution.

The series notes Hemingway’s “opportunist” decision to conceal the Stalinists’ execution of leftist José Robles, a friend and translator for American novelist John Dos Passos, who was working at the time with Hemingway on the film *The Spanish Earth* (directed by Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens). Hemingway claimed that such killings were “necessary in time of war,” and Dos Passos rightly denounced him, although it became the departure point for the latter’s own shift to the extreme right. Hemingway screened the Ivens film for Franklin D. Roosevelt in the White House, as part of a vain effort to drum up official American support for the Spanish Republican cause.

As we noted ten years ago, at the time of the 50th anniversary of Hemingway’s death, the writer’s politics, generally speaking, “were of a certain American left variety, an amorphous mix of socialism, liberalism and individualism. … During the Spanish Civil War he submitted to the politics and discipline of the Spanish Communist Party and Soviet Stalinists, not the only American ‘free spirit’ to do so, although he writes mistrustfully about them.”

For Whom the Bell Tolls is Hemingway’s novel of the Spanish Civil War, and it is “mistrustful” of the Loyalist-Stalinist leadership. It relates the events over several days in the life of a young American volunteer, Robert Jordan, serving in the International Brigades and attached to a guerrilla band, as he prepares to blow up a bridge. The explosion is vital to an offensive planned by the Loyalist army, with its Soviet and French advisers. The offensive is doomed, however, and Jordan tries unsuccessfully to have it called off.

The book begins and ends with the young American on the floor of a pine forest, an image, we commented in our 2011 article, that “brings back some of Hemingway’s earliest concerns and emotions,” associated with summers spent in northern Michigan, “but now the images are charged with world-historical and tragic dimension. The ‘boy from the American Middle West’ was now in the midst of vast events, with equally vast consequences. As Jordan prepares for death in an apparently hopeless cause, he can feel ‘his heart beating against the pine needle floor of the forest.’”

Wilson wrote, with some exaggeration, that in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* Hemingway had “largely sloughed off his Stalinism” and that “the artist is with us again, and it is like having an old friend back.” Wilson observed that “The whole picture of the Russians and their followers in Spain … looks absolutely authentic,” and indeed Hemingway was denounced by the Stalinist press in the US.

The new series makes much of Martha Gellhorn’s goading Hemingway into covering the Second World War as though it were some sort of virtue on her part. One has the sense that Hemingway rightly viewed the new mass carnage with a considerable degree of horror. Gellhorn appears to have been more gung-ho. When Hemingway did eventually make his way to Europe, he ended up observing and perhaps even participating in the bloody Battle of Hürtgen Forest in late 1944, the longest single battle the US army has ever fought. The sights he saw, the series suggest, “would haunt him” for the rest of his days. As Hemingway once remarked, “never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime. Ask the infantry and the dead.”

By the end of the world war, Hemingway was involved with journalist Mary Welsh, who would become his fourth and final wife. By all accounts, she endured a great deal over the next 15 years, as the writer experienced a sharp deterioration in his physical and moral condition. However triumphant official America and the Stalinist left may have been about the outcome of the war, Hemingway emerged from it an even more shattered human being. The onset of the Cold War troubled and demoralized him further. How else can one make sense of his comment, not cited by Burns and Novick, in a letter to fellow writer William Faulkner in 1947, following the victory of the US and its allies in “the good war,” the supposed war for democracy against fascism, that “Things [have] never been worse than now.”

The success of *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), which helped win Hemingway the Nobel Prize, and the Prize itself, tended to mask the overall decline and loss of purposefulness. The book, about an aging fisherman and his heroic but ultimately defeated effort to bring in a great fish, as we argued in 2011, “is well carried out, but its slightly condescending and sentimental tone is grating. And it almost celebrates resignation and defeatism.”

Islands in the Stream, *The Garden of Eden* and *True at First Light*, all published posthumously, are negligible works or worse. His memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, based on newly recovered notebooks and writings from his early days in Paris, was his last valuable and insightful work.

Hemingway, as the series documents, suffered serious injuries in two successive plane crashes in Africa in 1954. Erroneously, obituaries appeared in the international press. Hemingway had the unusual privilege of being able to read various premature attempts to sum up his life and work.

Afflicted with alcoholism and a host of physical wounds and ailments, unable to write satisfactorily, Hemingway inadvertently endured another blow when the Cuban revolution, which he generally supported, and US imperialism’s hostile response, combined to prevent him from returning to his beloved home outside Havana. He and Mary now resided in an isolated house in Ketchum, Idaho.

The series makes reference to Hemingway’s “paranoia” in regard to the FBI following and observing him. There may have been individual episodes of paranoia, but, in fact, documents subsequently made public revealed that J. Edgar Hoover and his ferociously anti-communist agency had been keeping an eye on the novelist since the 1940s.

In the early hours of July 2, 1961, the deeply, hopelessly depressed Hemingway shot himself at his Ketchum residence.

Hemingway’s life-story is an important one, for the light it sheds on art and politics in the last century.

The Burns-Novick series and the various interviewees refer, legitimately enough, on numerous occasions to Hemingway’s obsession with violence and death, and the brutality of life. But the responsibility for this “obsession” did not lie with Hemingway but with modern capitalist society. Born into an America created by the mass violence of the Civil War (in which both of Hemingway’s grandfathers fought) and the ensuing industrial-labor conflicts and imperialist interventions, Hemingway did not have to look far to find “darkness” and “butchery.” “How we are,” he pointedly observed in a letter in 1950, “is how the world has been.”

Again, *Hemingway*, in our view, does not get everything right and does not probe deeply and critically enough into some of the American establishment’s own mythology, but it has its priorities essentially correct.

And that has been enough to bring down on the series and on PBS the wrath of the race-and-gender set. How dare anyone pay attention to anyone but these people? An open letter from “Beyond Inclusion” March 29 to PBS President Paula Kerger “from viewers like us” questioned “the network’s over-reliance on one white male filmmaker,” i.e., Burns. Beyond Inclusion describes itself as “a BIPOC [black, Indigenous and people of color]-led collective of non-fiction makers, executives, and field builders.”

The letter complained about Burns's "211 hours of programming on PBS spanning 40 years," reflected "in 38 cumulative films, mini series and television series titles."

Rather than congratulating Burns on his sustained, diligent efforts over four decades, the open letter primarily suggests envy and petty back-biting. It would never occur to the authors, for example, to make a case for the infusion of tens of billions of dollars into PBS and the setting up of public film and arts programs on a mass scale that would enable young people of *every background*, including the most oppressed, to participate in cultural life. Rather, this unsavory pressure campaign by Beyond Inclusion is about divvying up more advantageously for its members and supporters the existing, meager resources.

The claim that the letter writers represent "viewers like us," in other words, that only "BIPOC" filmmakers can speak to the concerns of black and other audiences, while entirely predictable, is false and disgusting. In fact, frankly, in so far as the letter expresses affluent petty bourgeois selfishness and self-regard, it does not speak to *any* wide layer of the population.

The questions examined or touched upon in *Hemingway* —including the rise of modern American society, the relationship between artists and social struggles, the nature of fascism and Stalinism, the character of the two imperialist world wars—are or *ought to be* of the greatest concern to every section of the working class and to the serious-minded intelligentsia, if such a thing can be said to exist at present. They are of far greater concern, in any case, than any issue raised so far, or likely to be, by those fixated on their ethnic or gender identities.