

The Killers: Nick's Initiation into Adulthood

Hongmei Li, School of Foreign Languages and Cultures,
Xihua University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

Abstract — Hemingway's world as widely agreed is a more disordered, a more violent, brutal mess, hard to find any sure scale of values, resulting from tremendous social upheaval and economic and political devastation in the post-war Western society. His short story 'The Killers', from Men Without Women (1927), exposed harshly such a kind of world; rather in it he successfully portrayed a young boy's initiation into adulthood through hazardous circumstances.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ernest Hemingway, one spokesman of 'the Lost Generation', is primarily known for his keen observation of the post-war wasteland and concise portrayal of characters gasping in that world of chaos. He holds a pessimistic attitude toward life, as shown by his heroes. He sees life in terms of battles and tension. He thinks life is dangerous and ready to defeat or destroy men, but if men keep calm and try their best, they can win a spiritual victory. His stories deal with the question 'how to live with pain', 'how human beings live gracefully under pressure'. In addition, his style is laconic but expressive, for his application of Iceberg Principle and some unique narrative methods.

Ernest Hemingway's personal involvement in the wars and his participation in such violently masculine activities as boxing, bull fighting, deep-sea fishing, big-game hunting, allowed him enough materials to portray the great sufferings physically and spiritually conditioned by those. The Killers, from the collection of short stories, Men Without Women (1927), exposed harshly a world stripped of certainties, values, meanings.

The story, set in Henry's lunchroom in Summit, Illinois, right outside of Chicago during a 1920's winter, begins with two gangsters, Max and Al, walking into the lunchroom. They were not happy with the serving schedule. When ordering dinner, they poked fun maliciously at George and Nick Adams, the two servants. After finishing his meal, Al tied Nick and Sam—the Black cook, in the kitchen; while Max bragged to George about their purpose to eat here—to kill Ole Andreson, an aging boxer, also a frequent guest of this lunchroom. Since the boxer failed to show up in the diner, the gangsters left, and George hurried to untie Nick and Sam. He then suggested that Nick warn Andreson, who lived in a nearby boarding house. But to Nick's surprise, when hearing about Al and Max's plan to kill

him, the boxer said he was tired of running. Nick returned to the diner, where he told George and Sam that he's leaving Summit because he could not bear to think about a man waiting, passively, to be killed by a couple of hired killers.

In this story the focus is not the gangsters or George or Sam, or Ole Andreson, but Nick Adams. It is Nick, the young boy, who combines the whole story: as a witness and participant of all incidents, he is seen from the beginning to the end with his movement from Henry's lunchroom to Hirsch's house and then back to lunchroom again; he is the only one who is changed by what he sees, hears and feels; he is not one of the silent majority like his workmates, but one in action, to depart, to grow maturely. It is Nick, after being tied, seeing the violence, giving the message to Ole at the risk of his life, comes to realize the fact that the world is brutal, unstable, fragmented and chaotic. Nick's changes fit in the bildungsroman, 'novel of formation' or 'novel of education'. 'The subject is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences—and often through a spiritual crisis—into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world' (Abraham, 2010, 229).

II. NICK ADAMS' LIVING ENVIRONMENT: A WORLD OF VIOLENCE

The Killers is set in Henry's lunchroom from evening to night, a commonplace restaurant and an ordinary day. However, it is the calm before storm: something evil and unlawful is about to show. And Nick, the young boy, will begin his journey of growth from 5: 30 that evening and finishes it at night the same day, from his being tied by two gangsters, to being released after their departure, to informing Ole of his forthcoming death, until his own departure after the epiphany—the world is a messy, evil place in which men's fate seems to be doomed.

A. The Killers

The two killers Max and Al, are described as stereotyped gangsters as seen in films or TV series, who live by a code. Firstly their appearance and dressing style showcase conspicuously their identity. Al's face 'had tight lips. He wore a silk muffler and gloves'. 'Tight lips' usually means that a person is in the state of tension: determined or merciless. They wore 'derby hats, black overcoats buttoned across the chest...too tight to them' like 'twins'. They wore the standard uniforms of gangsters as seen in thrillers. Secondly they talk like gangsters as well. They teased George and Nick, complained and swore. Their speech is crude and not meaningful enough, yet characterized with mechanized gag and wisecrack from newspapers and films.

'You are a pretty right boy, aren't you?' 'Sure,' said George. 'Well, you are not,' said the other little man. 'Is he, Al?' 'He is dumb,' said Al. He turned to Nick. 'What's your name?'

'Nick Adams.' 'Another bright boy,' Al said. 'Ain't he a bright boy, Max?' 'The town's full of bright boys,' Max said. ... And 'What are you looking at?' Max looked at George. 'Nothing.' 'The hell you were. You were looking at me'. ... 'You ought to go to the movies more. The movies are fine for a bright boy like you.' These talks are full of naughty words and stereotyped banter. The final words about 'the movies' are spoken when they have made their arrangement in the lunchroom to tie Sam and Nick. The words point to thrillers, in which reasons for murder, procedure for gang killings are self-evident to the audience. This is understood by George.

'What are you going to kill Ole Andreson for? What did he ever do to you?' 'He never had a chance to do anything to us. He never even seen us.' 'And he's only going to see us once,' Al said from the kitchen. 'What are you going to kill him for, then?' George asked. 'We're killing him for a friend. Just to oblige a friend, bright boy'. Max and Al are both cold-blooded professional gangsters, who kill the people not because of personal hostilities or animosities, but because of their 'professional' code. As killing machines, they have little sense of justice and humanity. The unreal clichés from movies and newspapers spoken by them now have come into reality.

Thirdly when they tie Nick and the cook in the kitchen, instead of feeling guilty for their brutality, they are still joking frivolously like playing a funny game. Al said, 'The nigger and my bright boy are amused by themselves. I got them tied up like a couple of girl friends in the convent'. 'We got to keep amused, haven't we?' Obviously, murder, for them, is not a crime, but something very entertaining.

Finally their doings and gestures demonstrate their professional training and practice. Both of them ate with their gloves on in case they would be caught because of their fingerprints. They kept their eyes on the mirror that 'ran along back of the counter', by which they were able to carry out their action the moment their target turned up. As professional killers they are alert, sensitive, sinister, diabolic, but more purposeful and well-prepared, regardless of the life of innocent people. 'Inside the kitchen, George saw Al, his derby hat tipped back, sitting on a stool beside the wicket with the muzzle of a sawed-off shotgun resting on the ledge. Nick and the cook were back to back in the corner, a towel tied in each of their mouths'. In riot and terror, the innocents were exposed to danger and anxiety, which serves as a window to the calamity and influence caused by the war.

The post-war American society was indeed a dark world. Organized crimes in the 1920s were rampant. Partly because of President Warren Gamaliel Harding's 'return to normalcy' policies and the enactment of the 18th Amendment of prohibition, such illegal activities as bootlegging, gambling, prostitution worsened the social order and devastated the peace beneath the happy faces of 'Jazz Age'. The Mafia, an offshoot of a Sicilian criminal organization, managed to exploit the loopholes in the law and succeeded in controlling

bootlegging together with gambling and prostitution in the major cities. The most celebrated gangster was 'Scarface' Al Capone. In 1927 his Chicago-based bootlegging, prostitution, and gambling empire brought him an income of \$60 million. The Killers coincides with this famous gangster, in his name Al and the setting Chicago. Whether the story had the factual source or not, it strongly alluded to the temperament of that age. This period also witnessed the renewed growth of the Ku Klux Klan throughout the South; then it migrated northward and established itself in many northern states. In Washington high officials' corruption reached the unprecedented level. At the top was the President himself, Harding, who fortunately died a timely death (Tindall, 2007). In such a dark age, danger, crime and horror, loom over the world where many innocent people are suffering. Consequently, the two killers epitomize the invisible forces, heartless, ferocious, in the darkness or in the twilight (this story was set in the evening, beginning at 5 o'clock) to threaten the ordinary life. By committing murder and other serious crimes, they seek pleasure like those frenzied party-goers in the 'Jazz Age'. By the depiction of the killers, Hemingway pictured the violent and disordered post-war world where the daily life for the average people like George and Sam in Henry's lunchroom, was a meaningless mess but the two respond to this criminal incident in different ways.

B. George and Sam

George, is a sophisticated and intelligent boy. When faced up with the maneuver of the two gangsters, George is not frightened; instead, he develops calmly dialogues with them: to answer their empty questions and ask about purpose of coming here. When Max found fault with him, he was not surprised; he 'laughed' and said 'all right'. He kept calm when his workmates were tied up in the kitchen: he did what he was demanded by gangsters to do—to lie and prepare dinner for customers. He could discern the horror behind the teasing mask of Max and Al. More important, after being told about their plan of murder, he did not take actions right away bluntly but wait patiently and cautiously for the chance to save Ole Andreson as soon as possible. It was not until the two gangsters left, that he immediately instructed Nick to inform Ole. George's responses reflect a man's courage and wisdom under pressure.

While it is not difficult to find that George is not the idealistic hero worthy of one hundred percent worship. With no doubt, he, perhaps serving in this lunchroom for long, has seen and heard kinds of individuals and sorts of violent occurrences day by day, which makes him present a composed and wise image when coerced by the criminals. He understands profoundly that the real society is not a peaceful arena, but one full of horror, unrest, turbulence, etc. Fully aware of the dark facades of the real life in which he is a weak, lonely, insignificant atom, he just comes to terms with the state quo rather than behave as a heroic fighter against the existent evil forces. In this story, his experience and conscience

work together to propel him to save Ole's life by informing him of the forthcoming death the moment the gangsters depart. This is all he could do and has done. After Nick came back, in his speech with Nick his was brief, repetitive of Nick's except that he answered Nick about the reason for Ole's being killed: 'Double-crossed somebody. That's what they kill him for'. As for Nick's decision to get out of the city, he only commented: 'That's a good thing to do'. The story ends with his suggestion that Nick not think about the gangster killing. This is one who holds a detached attitude toward life. He does what he is able to do and what is under his control. He does not bother to think or worry about what is beyond his grasp.

To Hemingway, George represents a large portion of the ordinary people in the 1920s. They are courageous, kind-hearted and well-intended who embrace peace, love and order. WWI was over, however, unfortunately the peace did not come in the real sense. If the intellectuals, writers and artists felt disillusioned in the post-war era and could exile voluntarily in Europe, the ordinary Americans had nowhere to go except to be operated by social violence and widespread crimes in the prosperous consumer society. Now the mundane existence had been reduced to a nightmare. Powerless as they were, they came to realize that no one could escape from their destiny; it was pointless to try too hard but just to do what they could do.

Sam is another type of ordinary people. He is 'the nigger' cook. His colored identity dooms him to suffer factual hardships even in the North, which, in turn, tames him as one coward, meek, obedient and self-centered. He automatically replied the gangsters' demand with 'Yes, sir'. He accepts the reality, living in a very cautious way to be far way from any troubles in life. After untied by George, he said, 'I don't want any more of that', 'I don't like any of it at all'. His personal traumatic past and the stressful present have taught him not so much to be a trouble-maker, as an undetached passer-by in life. When Nick and George were talking about informing Ole, Sam turned away. When Nick returned and told George something about Ole, Sam said: 'I don't even listen to it'. He was, however, not neutral-minded or cold-blooded because he also advised Nick to 'stay way out of it'.

Sam, an inferior, deprived of many equal rights to the white, may represent another larger portion of people who are deaf-and-dumb to practical brutality. These people, struggling hard at the lower strata of society for survival, took it for granted that life went on as usual, neither better nor worse than before. When violence struck them, they suffered, tolerated and let it go. They are the silent majority, tamed, self-protective, the vulnerable creatures.

If George and Sam could be aloof from dangers, some could not. Ole Andreson, an aging prizefighter, who is going to be killed, arouses people's great anxiety and worry about the actual life.

III. NICK ADAMS' HERO: THE CODE HERO OLE ANDRESON

Ole is an embodiment of Hemingway's code hero, a man maintaining his dignity under threat, awaiting his doomed destiny in the world devoid of meaning and purpose. When Nick told him that the killers would kill him, Ole said: 'There isn't anything I can do about it.' 'I'm through with all that running around'. 'Don't you want me to go and see the police?' 'No.' Ole Andreson said. 'That wouldn't do any good.' 'Isn't there something I could do?' 'No. There isn't anything to do'. These dialogues portray a man who is in danger and in despair, too. In the past, much before the twentieth century, man's despair could be a way awaiting God's grace for salvation. The 'Supreme Being', as the absolute spirit, is always there to give men a helping hand to redeem them. Man prays, and then the godly light sedately projects into man's mind and releases him from the earthly sufferings. Pitifully Ole is a man in the modern age, when the events of the first half of the twentieth century caused a loss of confidence in the eternal truths, including faith in a Supreme Being. Atomic physics changed dramatically man's sense of time and space. The universe was not a rational one governed by definite laws of nature but an uncertain and chaotic cosmos whose operations seemed to lie beyond predictability or control. The sense of estrangement from God and reason produced a condition of anxious withdrawal that has been called 'alienation'. There is no exception to Ole. He believed in nothing, neither his own efforts nor the authority like the police. Equally important is the fact that he had no fears of death or anything because he had resigned himself to death.

Ole fits into Hemingway's 'the code hero', who is an ordinary man, physically strong and intellectually wise, with masculine tastes. He is reserved, self-disciplined, struggling alone with firm decisiveness and stubborn determination for a doomed battle. He is a man of action, of few words, even in front of ruin and death. In this short story, Ole is a 'big man', a heavyweight prize fighter. He 'was lying on the bed with all his clothes on'. Throughout his dialogue with Nick, he never looked at Nick, just 'talking toward the wall' and 'in the same flat voice'. There is not any further description of his appearance, his room or his everything. In front of the readers is an old man with all masculinity and experience, insensitive, simple, but aware of pathos or tragedy. He is bit of world weary ('I'm through with all that running around'). Mrs. Bell, the one to look after the house where Old inhabits, says that day was 'a nice fall day'. 'Fall', a season of maturity, is not fine for Ole. It alludes to his decaying age, his worsened physical state, and certainly his approaching death.

Ole, however, holds firm his honor. In front of destruction he did not escape in frenzy or surrender to the malice willingly. Although he was still hesitant to get out of his room, he told Nick he would go out to meet his doom. He expressed his gratitude to Nick twice for coming to tell him about it. He is not unlike the Cuban fisherman Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* who fought a losing battle in loneliness with his 'honor' kept intact. He is also

the old man in *A Well-lighted Place* (1933) who drank heavily the strong alcohol Brandy during lonely nights in a Spanish café, thinking to end his life but failing to do it. He has many other companions in Hemingway's stories or novels. They, who are in their decay, even not physically decaying sometimes, are homeless, friendless. Afflicted with unknown forces, they choose to wait for their doom, to face death with stoicism, dignity, bravery (physical courage) and a detached attitude. Cleanth Brooks sums up Hemingway hero: 'though he is aware of the claims of this spontaneous human emotion, is afraid to yield to those claims because he has learned that the only way to hold on to „honor', to individuality, to the human order as against the brute chaos of the world, is to live by his code....Hemingway's heroes are aristocrats in the sense that they are the initiate, and practice a lonely virtue.' (Brooks, 2005, 199) Ole exemplifies the state of mind of those in the turbulent world, who destroyed but not defeated, prevail at last.

IV. NICK ADAMS' ATTAINMENT OF MATURITY

It is from Ole that Nick learns to shake off his naivety and moves into maturity. Nick, a kind and innocent teenager, incarnates younger generation who are compelled to be dragged into troubles and thus make their own discoveries about a society which is full of brutality, disorder, and fragmentation and people in desperation. By the application of 'The Theory of Windows', that is, the plots and action are arranged in specific time and spots, which, like windows, displays readers concrete tableaux and scenes and develops along with the mobile narration clues (Herman, 2002), Hemingway manages to move Nick from one mobile window scene to another, i.e., from Henry's lunchroom to Hirsch's house and from Hirsch's house to Henry's lunchroom, finally succeeds in fulfilling Nick's awakening about the world he lives in. In the scenes, as a thriller film showed, 'the characters become actors, everyone of whom is free to express himself and to act, and correspondingly readers become audience who are seemingly appreciating a good film or play by the camera acted by the narrator' (Wang, 1994, 201). The windows' changes, in fact, resemble the collage of the fragmentations, and what this broken form reflects is incomplete content and information, the carrier of the disintegrated world. Thus what opens before Nick's eyes during his movement in these window scenes is not only a world of violence, but also one of fragmentation and meaninglessness.

At the onset in Henry's lunchroom, Nick looked innocent of evil and crime of the society. He is not so experienced as George. He could be shocked at the killers when with the black cook, tied up in the kitchen with a towel stuffed in the mouth. When the killers left, as simple and inexperienced as he was, he was irritated and very indignant. Learning from George that a man named Ole Anderson was going to be shot, he immediately agreed to go to inform him despite Sam's warning of possible danger. Different from George and

Sam, he was the one to do, to act and to articulate. In his dialogue with Ole, the latter was disinterested and brief in his replies. It was Nick that was the one to lead the conversation and develop it. He informed, asked questions, and gave suggestions ('Don't you want me to go and see the police?' 'Isn't there something I could do?'). A younger boy as he was, he simply could not figure out the reason why Ole refused to escape. His limited years of growth were not able for him enough to probe much deep into the affair. Such an experience, whereas, could be a beginning point of his understanding to the world. Back to the lunchroom it had already dawned on him that 'it's an awful thing.' He decided to 'get out of this town' instead of accepting George's advice 'not (to) think about it'. Nick's discovery of evil and violence renews his naive and simple opinions about the fragmented world. In this sense Nick is a typical Hemingway hero who is learning 'the code', namely 'his awareness of life, a manly love of danger and adventure, with a natural admiration of every individual who fights the good fight in a world of reality overshadowed by violence and death' (The defensive statement of Nobel Prize in 1954).

V. CONCLUSION

In *The Killers*, Hemingway, by portraying a world of instability and characters in it, successfully completes a *Bildungsroman*, a boy's initiation into maturity under messy, and haphazard circumstances. The gangster murder epitomizes a sinister world which is glutted with blood and peril. Those involved have responded to it in their different ways, most passively, 'broken physically by the brutality of war and depressed by the insensitivity and hollowness of civilized society' (Hu, 1995, 343). Nick, following the example of Ole, has a renewed sense of the world and of himself. The 'code' he has learnt may not redeem himself and the world, but at least casts some light on belief in humanity and compassion. Another telling evidence is Mrs. Bell, who typifies a world of normality. To her, Ole Andreson is just a nice and gentle man, whether he is a prize fighter or somebody else. She points to ordinary individuals and her life continues to flow on its usual course even if the unreal horror of the film thriller has come real.