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American Shoot-Out: Hemingway vs. Richard Ford

Ernest Hemingway's 1936 short story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" has long been, despite its setting in Africa, an American classic. One of its subjects, aside from the famous analysis of courage and grace under pressure,[1] is sexual betrayal.[2] Its story of a man trying to behave as a man when he is undermined both by fear of violent death and the treacherous behavior of an adulterous wife has become a defining document in our concept of the American character.

Now a new story by Richard Ford, "Issues," published this year in *The New Yorker* (September 18, 2000), challenges Hemingway on his own grounds. Its juxtaposition of adulterous sex and violent death so clearly evokes Hemingway's classic story that at first glance we are almost tempted to take it as a case of plagiarism. But a close comparison of the two stories shows that Ford is not just copying. His story echoes Hemingway's on the most basic grounds of style, narrative technique and characterization, even the epistemological grounds upon which choices about style and characterization are based. The comparison thus helps us see how some important aspects of American culture have changed since then. To my mind, the comparison not only reinforces our sense of Hemingway as a kind of a gold standard, but it also reveals Ford to be one of the most worthy--and most dangerous--of his progeny.

The comparison begins and ends, I think, in the juxtaposition of two women, the adulterous antagonists of the two stories. Margot Macomber, Hemingway's adulteress,

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1 For a good discussion of the code of the hunter, see Robert Penn Warren's 1949 essay, "Ernest Hemingway," reprinted in Warren's *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 87.

2 See, for instance, Edmond Wilson's 1947 discussion in "Hemingway: Guage of Morale," in *The Wound and the Bow*, reprinted in *Ernest Hemingway: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), p. 31; or Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: the Writer as Artist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), pp. 187-196.

has come to be known as a prototype of a certain kind of distinctively American woman. Hemingway uses the mind of Robert Wilson, the English safari guide, to describe such women, who belong to an international sporting set:

> They are, he thought, the hardest in the world; the hardest, the cruellest, the most predatory and the most attractive and their men have softened or gone to pieces nervously as they have hardened. Or is it that they pick men they can handle? They can't know that much at the age they marry, he thought. He was grateful that he had gone through his education on American women before now because this was a very attractive one.[3]

Margot's husband, Francis Macomber, has "just shown himself, very publicly, to be a coward" (p. 122), running from a wounded lion, and she has immediately begun to punish him for it. During the night, she sneaks out of the tent to sleep with Wilson, not at all minding that her husband is aware of it. When she returns, her husband says,

> "Where have you been?"
>
> "I just went out to get a breath of air."
>
> "You did, like hell."
>
> "What do you want me to say, Darling?"
>
> "Where have you been?"
>
> "Out to get a breath of air."
>
> "That's a new name for it. You *are* a bitch."
>
> "Well, you're a coward."
>
> "All right," he said. "What of it."
>
> "Nothing as far as I'm concerned. But please let's not talk, darling, because I'm very sleepy."

[3] Ernest Hemingway, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," from *The Snows of Kilimanjaro and Other Stories* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), p. 126.

"You think that I'll take anything."

"I know you will, sweet." (p. 140)

Clearly, for Hemingway, the relation between Margot and Francis Macomber is emblematic of something more archetypal: the war between the sexes. Clearly, it is not about sex but sexual politics: not love, but power. When Margot has the upper hand, she uses her power to terrorize her husband. Later in the story, when her husband regains his courage in a hunt for buffalo, we understand that she will lose that power. In the unforgettable climax of the story, she picks up the powerful 6.5 Mannlicher rifle while she is sitting in the car and, with her husband standing firm in front of the charging buffalo, shoots and kills him.

In an earlier passage, in Hemingway's famous long, uncoiling whiplash sentences,we get the key moment of her husband's short life from his point of view. The buffalo comes charging out of the bush

> nose out, mouth tight closed, blood dripping, massive head straight out, coming in a charge, his little pig eyes bloodshot as he looked at them. Wilson, who was ahead was kneeling shooting, and Macomber, as he fired, unhearing his shot in the roaring of Wilson's gun, saw fragments like slate burst from the huge boss of the horns, and the head jerked, he shot again at the wide nostrils and saw the horns jolt again and fragments fly, and he did not see Wilson now and, aiming carefully, shot again with the buffalo's huge bulk almost on him and his rifle almost level with the on-coming head, nose out, and he could see the little wicked eyes and the head started to lower and he felt a sudden white-hot, blinding flash explode inside his head and that was all he ever felt. (p. 153)

When we compare that death scene to Richard Ford's, we see a wealth of similarities, enough to make the differences vividly apparent. Steven Reeves's murderous wife is Marjorie Reeves, an American woman who announces to her husband, as they are driving down a rural road in Connecticut toward a dinner party with another couple, that

she has had an affair with the older, more powerful man who is their host. This news comes in the first paragraph. There has been no background story about cowardice and courage, no evidence of an ongoing power struggle. Steven pulls their Mercedes station wagon off the road to "organize the information properly before going on."

The almost soulless casualness with which she delivers this news warns us that this is another document in the history of the war between the sexes. The marriage seems as inessential as that of the Macombers. Their situation is described with an overly dense layer of unfocused detail, but without a hint of irony. Steven's work, for instance, is described this way:

> His job meant poring over esoteric petrochemical-industry journals, attending technical seminars, flying to vendor conventions, then writing up status reports while keeping an eye on the market for the benefit of his higher-ups. (p. 136)

Though the story is ostensibly his, there is nothing in these details which grant him any moral weight or status, either as protagonist or victim.

Yet the outlines of the story are nearly identical to Hemingway's. A few minutes later, by a kind of reflex he hardly understands, Steven instinctively tries to regain the upper hand. He hits her-- in the nose, with the back of his hand. Though the blood ruins her "tiny green cocktail dress," she remains strangely calm. "I can't go to the Nicholsons' now," she says (p. 140).

But she immediately fights back. When he demands to know if she is sorry for her adultery, she says,

> "I was sorry when I told you . . . though not very sorry. . . . Only sorry because I had to tell you. And now that I've told you and you've hit me in my face and probably broken my nose, I'm not sorry about anything--except that. And I'm sorry about being married to you, which I will remedy as soon as I can." (p. 141)

As in the Hemingway story, there is also a story about an animal. Not a lion or a buffalo, but a raccoon. The raccoon is hit, as they watch, by a passing pickup truck. The callousness of the driver infuriates Marjorie. When she sees the injured raccoon trying to drag itself off the road, she continues her tirade:

> "So *now*, will you as a gesture of whatever good there is in you, get out and go over and do something to help that poor injured creature that those motherfucking rednecks maimed with their motherfucking pickup truck and then, because they are pieces of shit and low forms of degraded humanity, laughed about? Can you do that, Steven? Is that in your range?" (p. 141)

So Stephen, unaware, walks twenty yards up the deserted rural road to see, in the dark, about an injured raccoon which has dragged itself into the roadside bushes. While he is there he hears his own car start up. The headlights "disclose" him.

> He turned just in time to see Marjorie's pretty face illuminated, as his own had been, by the salmon dashboard lights. He saw the tips of her fingers atop the arc of the steering wheel, heard the sudden surge of the engine. In the woods to the west he noticed an odd glow coming through the trees, something yellow, something out of the low, wet ground, a mist, a vapor, something that might be magical. The air smelled sweet now. The peepers stopped peeping. And then that was all. (p. 141)

The parallels between the two stories are inescapable. In both stories, the woman commits adultery and makes sure her husband knows of it. In both stories, the husband is severely weakened by the news, but recovers his strength and fights back. Both stories suggest a simi-mystical relationship between the man and nature. In both stories the wife kills the husband in an act of sudden violence. At Macomber's sudden death, Hemingway writes, "and that was all he ever felt." At Steven Reeve's sudden death,

Ford writes almost identically: "And then that was all." Even the name of Ford's deadly female, Marjorie, echoes that of Hemingway's role model, Margot.

The parallels are indeed so obvious that Ford must have intended them to be noticed. Of course no one will accuse him of plagiarism. The currently fashionable word is "quotation." Some of us might be reminded of the aphorism, "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," but Ford is too scrupulous a writer merely to imitate.[4] Rather, by joining Hemingway's game and claiming to play it better than he, Ford seems deliberately to be throwing down the gauntlet at Hemingway's feet. He at once pays homage to the Master and lays claim to his position in the pantheon of American Literature.

In fact, Ford has considered himself Hemingway's challenger for many years, at least since the mid eighties, when he told me so in a personal conversation. Moreover, the title of his recent collection of three long stories, *Women with Men*, specifically echoes Hemingway's own 1927 collection of stories, *Men Without Women*.[5] Ford must have been very proud that his first novel, *A Piece of My Heart* (Harper & Row, 1976), was nominated for the Ernest Hemingway Prize for Best First Novel. Critics have long spotted the similarities between Ford and Hemingway--the hard-boiled prose, the masculine interests in hunting and fishing, the love-hate relationship with women, the consuming efforts of men to find proper ways of behaving in the face of death. Both writers constantly require the presence of death to lend intensity and meaning--or meaninglessness--to their narrators' and heroes' every move.[6]

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[4] Indeed, scrupulousness itself is another point of comparison between Ford and Hemingway. Ford's discipline as a writer is that of a man hyper-conscious of Hemingway's failure to maintain discipline in the face of success, as documented by Hemingway's African companion-piece, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." C.f., for instance, Baker 192 ff.

[5] And, perhaps. Ford Maddox Ford's previous novel, *Women and Men*.

[6] This seems especially true of Ford's most recent work. All three of the novelettes in *Women With Men* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997) feature this juxtaposition.

When Ford was at the University of Michigan, in the early sixties, Hemingway's stories--"The Killers," "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," "Big Two-Hearted River," "Hills like White Elephants"--were among the defining documents in every English major's awareness of the fashionable philosophy of the time, existentialism. It was a European existentialism, to be sure, owned mostly by Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. A certain sentimental version of it gave *cachet* to the American beatniks, Jack Kerouac and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg. But for finding the honest black core of this "God-abandoned" world,[7] it was necessary to read Hemingway, to "hear" the Hemingway style. Albert Camus himself had heard it there.

Yet Ford, though he is very much a stylist and prides himself on the discipline of his sentences every bit as much as Hemingway did, sounds very different. For Hemingway, presentation is all. He pares every sentence down to an almost mannered minimal, hoping to achieve concreteness through a kind of magical, hypostatic, austerity of expression. Hemingway means, by style alone, to apotheosize even ordinary, banal events into something timeless and religious (or quasi-religious or parodically religious). For example, here is Hemingway on the subject of lime gimlets:

> The mess boy had started them already, lifting the bottles out of the canvas cooling bags that sweated wet in the wind that blew through the trees that shaded the tents. (p. 121)

> So they sat there in the shade where the camp was pitched under some wide-topped acacia trees with the boulder-strewn cliff behind them, and a stretch of grass that ran to the boulder-filled stream in front with forest beyond it, and drank their just-cool lime drinks and avoided one another's eyes while the boys set the table for lunch. (p. 124)

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[7] Warren p. 88.

For Hemingway, drinks are not only social habits, but moments when men celebrate and ritualize their places in nature. The language sounds like liturgy in the way it enumerates the sacramental elements of their place in the landscape. Ford, too, ritualizes nature at moments of death.

But most of the time, Ford is an explainer rather than a presenter.[8] His narrators, usually (though not in this story) the main characters, are typically loquacious, hyper-sensitive men who love to explain themselves with extreme attention to nuance. Ford's great talent is in noticing every device of self-justification and rationalization that Americans employ, and reporting all of them with the kind of ruthless and unapologetic detail that apotheosizes banality itself.

As a result, Ford's existentialism comes out sounding very different from Hemingway's. For Hemingway, personal courage and honor are defined in the acts of a human being facing death. For all existentialists, of course, the inevitability of death is the paramount fact. Death is what renders, in the existential mind, all of one's acts meaningless. But at the same time, for Jean Paul Sartre and Hemingway both, acting in the face of meaninglessness is courageous. This is, of course, paradoxical, or as Sartre would insist, absurd. Such a philosophy distrusts rational explanation, and requires an austere, even astringent language. It is an austerity born of the distrust of meaning itself. The writer who knows that his words cannot be trusted will not rely on words. Hence Hemingway's intense effort to turn words from mere symbols or signs into concrete events in and of themselves.

Ford's existentialism, on the other hand, is of a very different sort. While Hemingway's people assert their individuality by acting heroically (or at least extremely) in the face of absurdity, Ford's people seem merely at the mercy of the meaninglessness of their actions. Ford trusts words, but he doesn't trust the categories or ideologies or

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[8] In a July 21, 1999, radio interview conducted by Beth Farnsworth at PBS, Ford argued that Hemingway's compressed style was too compact to allow the necessary exploration of the moral issues. "Hemingway often, because he was casual in talking about despair, because he was casual in letting his characters not say what they thought often, he didn't express for me enough. He was in many ways stingy with language and didn't express what I thought was literature's moral density and complexity accurately enough, or in a way, morally enough." http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec99/hemingway_7-21.html

even the truisms of his culture. For example, though he was born and sometimes lives in Mississippi, he refuses to think of himself as a Southern writer. But it's not just that the idea of a "Southern Writer" carries a lot of ideological baggage that he doesn't wish to appropriate for himself; he doesn't believe there is any such thing as a southern writer or a southern literature.

In one sense, such a position is commendable. Every writer should distrust the *received* meanings of words and concepts. He or she should take on the obligation to *make* meaning, not just repeat meanings that are already there. Ford is scrupulous about that. As narrators, Ford's spokespeople are not feminists, not republicans, not liberals, not romantics--none of the isms of our time are spoken for. But at the same time, this refusal to believe in essences of any kind affects his ability to characterize. No one in his books, for instance, finds any grace or courage or integrity among the choices of his life. Ford doesn't seem to believe in the existence of character, of place, of essence of any kind. Characters who *want* to believe in such things are given a faintly satirical treatment, a gentle laugh at their naivety. For example, Steven Reeves, in college,

> had taken Dr. Sudofsky's class on "Ulysses" at Bates, and come away with a sense of irony and humor and a conviction that true knowledge was a spiritual journey, a quest, not a storage of dry facts--a thing like freedom which you fully experienced only in practice. He had also played hockey and thought that knowledge and aggressiveness were a subtle and surprising combination. He practiced both at Packard-Wells. (137)

Here, Steven's self-assessment is a collection of abstract nouns and clichés (irony, humor, true knowledge, spiritual journey, quest, freedom, knowledge) which should, but doesn't, render unnecessary Ford's foregoing explanation: "He knew he was a callow man--a boy in some ways, still--but he was not stupid" (p. 137).

But satire is not Ford's usual mode. What he seems to strive for is a scrupulously emotionless description of the thoughts in a character's head, in a way which

precisely calibrates his clarity or muddle-headedness at that moment. Now, for instance, Steven is rather muddled:

> But for a brief and terrifying moment in the cool, padded semi-darkness just when he began to experience his loss for words, he entered or at least nearly slipped into a hypnotic fuguelike state in which he began to realize and fear that he perhaps *could* not say another word; that something (work fatigue, shock, disappointment over what Marjorie had admitted) was at that moment causing him to detach from reality, to begin to slide away from the moment he was in, and in fact to lose his purchase and go crazy to the extent that he was in jeopardy of beginning to gibber like a chimp, or just to slip slowly sideways against the upholstered door and not speak for a long, long time--months--and then only with the aid of drugs be able merely to speak in simple utterances that would seem cryptic, so that eventually he would have to be looked after by his mother's family in Damariscotta. (p. 137)

This sentence is, in a certain way, a virtuoso piece of bad writing. It is 162 words of mumbling, and Ford takes a considerable risk that readers will blame him for it rather than Steven. But we know that Ford is a careful stylist, and we have to imagine that he constructed this artlessly inefficient sentence deliberately to show Steven beginning to "gibber like a chimp." It is a vivid example of Ford's technique of removing individuality from his characters. Here Steven seems a helpless vessel of helpless babblings, certainly not a hero trying to gird his loins for battle.

Such passages also raise an important question about the management of point of view. Does the language belong to the omniscient narrator, or to the limited point of view of the character? Traditional practitioners of the short story would use both points of view, but would insist on keeping them distinguishable so that the answer could be determined. It has been a tenet of Modernism since Henry James that the reader must be allowed his skepticism and his freedom to make his own judgments about the characters and the events of a story. But Ford deliberately merges two points of view so that this question is

not answerable. This merging has the effect of imposing the author's ideology on the materials of the story, as was common in the 19th century but supposedly disallowed in the 'realist" traditions of the 20th.

In fact, Ford does that quite deliberately, as a kind of homage to Hemingway, from whom he learned it. It is a form of epistemological "cheating," and one of the defining characteristics of postmodernist art. Even though Hemingway wrote his story in the 1920's, he was postmodernist in this respect, and that is one reason his influence continues today. The purpose of this "cheating" is to disallow the reader's skepticism, to deny the reader an epistemological finger-hold by which he might pry apart the various levels of the narrative and thereby arrive at an independent judgment about the meaning of the events. Its effect is to present the events of the story as opaque and unquestionable. A classic example occurs at the climax of Hemingway's story, when the apparently objective narrator says,

> . . . and Mrs. Macomber, in the car, had shot at the buffalo with the 6.5 Mannlicher as it seemed about to gore Macomber and had hit her husband about two inches up and a little to one side of the base of his skull. (p. 524)

Did she, or did she not, intend to kill her husband? The question turns on the point of view of this passage.[9] If the sentence is in the objective narrator's point of view, then the words "had shot at the buffalo" mean that her intention was to save her husband's life by killing the buffalo. Yet the words "seemed about to gore Macomber", while reinforcing the sense of her good motive, also permits us to suspect the objectivity of the narration.

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[9] The issue of whether Margot meant to kill her husband has been analyzed from a number of other perspectives, too. There are biological, contractual, emotional, political, even logistical analyses of the isue. A few of them, respectively, are Bennett Kravitz, "She Loves Me, She Loves Me Not: The Short Happy Symbiotic Marriage of Margot and Francis Macomber," in the *Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 21, no. 3 (Fall 1998), 83-87; Michelle Sugiyama, "What's Love Got to Do With It? An Evolutionary Analysis of 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,'" *The Hemingway Review* 15 (1996), 15-32 (see esp. p. 27); Nina Baym, "Actually I Felt Sorry for the Lion," in *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, ed. Jackson J. Benson, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990, p. 113; Jerry A. Herndon, "No 'Maggie's Drawers' for Margot Macomber," *Fitzgerald-Hemingway Annual* (Columbia, S.C., 1975), p. 289-91.

Such ambiguities tease us, but at last there is no consistent pattern which would allow us to distinguish the various points of view in the story. Hemingway, in the interest of opacity rather than clarity, lets ambiguity reach into its very epistemological structures. He allows his point of view to move everywhere: he goes into the mind of Francis Macomber, Wilson, even the lion; but not, in any revealing way, the mind of Margot. The result is an increased sense of fear on the part of the reader: the issues that result in death at the hands of an American woman are not attributable to any local psychology or logic; they are mythic, or universal, or merely incomprehensible. And therefore the more frightening.

Ford, clearly, learned this too from Hemingway. But he pushes the post-modernist idea of point of view a step further than Hemingway did. In Ford's narration, there is a deliberate, almost fascist, in-your-face refusal to allow the various points of view to distinguish themselves so that the reader can assess the various versions of reality. The sense of a separable narrator disappears altogether, and the personal, insistently explanatory voice of the author urges us to a sense not of clarity about what is happening, as one would think would be the advantage of omniscience, but to a sense of the opacity, almost the arbitrariness, of what is really happening. One might try, for example, to count how many distinguishable points of view there are in the following:

> She was a pretty, blond, convictionless girl with small demure features--small nose, small ears, small chin, though with a surprisingly full-lipped smile, which she practiced on everyone. She was fond of getting a little tipsy at parties and lowering her voice and sitting on a flowered ottoman or a burl tabletop with a glass of something and showing too much of her legs or inappropriate amounts of her small breasts . . . . Steven had . . . liked her bobbed hair, wispy features, translucent skin, and the slightly husky voice that made her seem more sophisticated than she was, and somehow convinced her she was, too. In their community, east of Hartford, the women who knew Marjorie Reeves thought of her as a bimbo who would not stay

> married to sweet Steven Reeves very long. His second wife would be the right wife. Marjorie was just a starter.
>
> Marjorie, however, did not think of herself that way, but only that she liked men and felt happy around them and assumed Steven thought this was fine and that in the long run it would help his career to have a pretty wife no one could pigeonhole. (p. 137)

On a certain level, of course, we can distinguish Steven's' preferences and the neighborhood women's theories from Marjorie's self justifications, but clearly they are all subsumed under the omniscient, explanatory voice of the story-teller, who feels free to tell us she was not as sophisticated as she thought, and sometimes behaved "inappropriately." Who is this story-teller? Certainly he has a kind of omniscience, such that he can speak for the other party-goers (men?) who are "surprised" at her full lips, and the other sensibility (somebody's wife?) who finds the amount of leg or breast she shows "too much" or "inappropriate." And whose words are "bobbed" or "wispy" or "translucent"? Steven's? More likely the author's own. What we sense here is not Steven's description of an attractive woman encountered at a party, but the author's direct creation of a woman who does not exist outside his words.

This narrator, clearly, is no single person or point of view, but simply an authoritative voice, with local inflections, who can move around among the players in the scene like a movie director. Sometimes the point of view is that of the community of opinion, sometimes only the location of the moving camera in the imagined movie of the same subject (as when, for instance, we see from outside the car what Steven looks like in the glare of the car's "salmon-colored" dashboard lights.) As in many post-modern stories, the narrator is not so much omniscient or godlike (certainly not benevolent) as simply the manipulator of the world of the story, telling all his characters where to stand and what to say. Finally, there is no sense at all that the story is *their* story, or that they might at any minute carry it into directions that the author might not have predicted. The

ostensible randomness of the events is merely a disguise: the story is his, and they are merely his spokespeople.

This kind of authorial domination of the story is another distinctly postmodern feature, and one of its consequences is that it renders characterization itself obsolete. Ford doesn't ever let his characters speak for themselves. The sense of artifice in their creation is deliberate, and reminds us of who's boss here. This implies that what is really being communicated here is the author's ideology, not his characters' stories.

In this, Ford has significantly pushed beyond Hemingway's post-modernism. Hemingway's multiple points of view create shadows, ambiguities and mysteries. His famous dictum--that the dignity of an iceburg is owing to the fact that seven eighths of it is under water--reminds us that so much of the story exists in implication, somewhere in the background. Everything that happens in the story has momentum and weight because so much of what the story contains is unsaid. Thus, the reader feels able to learn something from studying Hemingway--about, for example, the meaning of death or courage, about the wars between the sexes, about the character of American woman or the consequences of sexual infidelity. And so it is that critics feel it important to settle whether Margot "meant" to kill her husband or not, as if she were a real person whose motives and feelings existed beyond Hemingway's reporting of them.

To be sure, critics have often criticized Hemingway's characterizations, especially of women. They are all, it is often said, either angels or bitches. But at least characterization is one of his intents, and the idea of communicating a sense of individuality is central to him. For Hemingway, one affirms his individuality by the way one behaves in the face of the world's absurdity. Ford, by contrast, doesn't seem to want to characterize at all. Of course he surrounds his people with a density of seemingly observed detail, but he doesn't really believe in character. The woman here, Marjorie Reeves, is not someone the concept of character can even explain. She's not at all mythic or prototypical; rather, she is ideological.

What does it mean to say that she represents Ford's ideology? I have already indicated that Ford's ideology is not political or philosophical or ethical. Ford, as I have

suggested, doesn't credit any of the cultural generalizations or political theses that one might expect a writer in the 90's to want to push. Rather, I believe that Ford's ideology is an extension of Hemingway's existentialism. While Hemingway always leaves his characters (and the reader) facing the absurdity of meaningless and often murderous fact, Ford pushes this existential absurdity a step further. He seems to find this absurdity not just in extreme moments, but everywhere in society, in ordinary everyday life. Where others find that people's stories illustrate principles or morals or at least cultural generalizations, Ford does not allow the possibility of anyone's learning anything. Indeed, in "Issues," it is significant that Steven's powerful insight, in the moment before he dies, is that he doesn't know his wife; indeed, the possibility of knowing her has been lost, or never existed. Indeed, the possibility of anybody ever knowing anything is so remote as to never have been within anyone's expectations.

In short, Ford's postmodern point-of-view structure directly entails his attitude toward characterization. For that matter, many postmodernist writers barely pay lip service to the idea of characterization, and Ford shows us why. When the point of view is so controlling, the people in the stories have no depth and no mystery. The authorial spotlight moves everywhere, leaving no shadows. As a result, the sense of people having lives outside the story disappears.

This lack of characterization is not only technical: it is also thematic. While Ford tells us a great deal about Marjorie, none of the information is the sort that one might base conclusions on, or that allows Steven to believe that he knows or understands her.

> . . . in Marjorie's character there had always been the impulse to confess upsetting things that turned out--he believed--not to be true; being a hooker for a summer up in Saugatuck; topless dancing while she was an undergraduate; heroin experimentation; taking part in armed robberies with her high-school boyfriend in Goshen, where she was from. . . . And now, while he didn't particularly think any of these stories was a bit truer, he did think that he didn't really know his wife at all;

> and that the entire conception of knowing another person, of trust, of closeness, of marriage itself was . . . completely out of date, defunct, was something that typified another era, now unfortunately gone. (p. 138)

Clearly Ford had a good reason for inserting the rumors of Marjorie's criminal background: they help mitigate the essential implausibility of the ending. But it is instructive to notice that these details don't help much with *characterizing* Marjorie. It is a fault of the story, I think, that we don't really have any curiosity about whether she actually did those things. She seems to have no depths that we are unaware of. Steve sees this tendency to confess crimes as a part of her character, perhaps merely a tease; but the narrator won't let us believe this. Every word she utters in the story turns out to be simply and literally true, even when she is only saying, "you'll be sorry." And that, rather than creating some sense of psychological depth in her character, seems part of her monstrousness.

One aspect of human individualism, of course, is expressed in people's aspirations and motivations. But Marjorie doesn't seem to have either of those. The question of her motivation doesn't even arise in the story, and the issue of emotional plausibility seems itself to be of no concern. How could Steve and Marjorie ever have shared a pleasant breakfast or an intimate evening? These things are imaginable, but seem outside the story altogether. The relationship between these two married people is not even personal. Rather, it is merely exemplary--of Ford's view of a world in which misunderstanding, ignorance, and the failure of essence are absolute because there is nothing--not character, not meaning, not motivation or reason--to be understood.

For more evidence of this, we might ask what can be expected to happen after the ending of the stories. Margot Macomber, Hemingway's story implies, will continue to live after the story is over. She will have to go to Nairobi and endure a hearing and its attendant publicity. But soon, we guess, she will return to America to bask in new-found notoriety and her husband's money, and continue to live in a way befitting Hemingway's theories about people of her class and station. But it's very difficult to imagine Marjorie

Reeves continuing to live her own life. Ford's story does not invite us to imagine what happens next. Will she continue to the dinner party? Will she wash the blood off her face in the powder room and then amuse her hosts with some tale of what happened to Steven? Will she return home and catch a plane to another country before the body is found? No imaginable scenario is implied or even seems possible. It as if she exists for the sake of the story only, and has no existence or meaning of her own outside it.

What does this refusal to characterize mean as a phenomenon in American literature? I believe it points up a disturbing pattern in the ongoing culture wars in America. It means that Ford, and postmodern literature itself insofar as he represents it, has moved beyond humanism. Characterization in literature is an expression and a celebration of the concept of individualism, itself fundamental to humanism in the American idea of it. But for at least some postmodern theorists, the belief in individuality is merely a kind of blindness, a refusal to acknowledge that all of us are merely determined by our situatedness in our own time, place, gender, race, and economic class. For them too, there is no such thing as individuality. For some of the more political of such theorists, the only possible ethics is to forget "personal" choice, join a radical ideology devoted to overturning or subverting all distinctions of gender, race, and class, and "transform" the self as well as the world in the name of tolerance and understanding. We might take Ford to be in that group, observing for example that Steven and Marjorie themselves take for granted their positions in a privileged lifestyle.

But Ford is not political in that sense, and one of the remarkable things about his story is that there is no hint that it wants to make any such facile or idealistic point. In Ford's world, nothing seems to count--not character, philosophy, commitment, even skill. His story doesn't try to be comic or satirical or even ironic, though perhaps even this is an irony.[10] Ford passes no judgment on the meaninglessness of Steven's situation

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[10] By one count, of course, it is hugely ironic that Marjorie cold-bloodedly kills her husband with the car immediately after she has railed at the "degraded humanity" of the driver of the pickup truck who ran over a "poor creature," a raccoon. But there is no underlying psychological pattern that would make this irony meaningful in terms of her character. The story doesn't even seem interested in letting us explain her as a sociopath. She may be one, but Ford's point is that her condition is not personal. It's built into the world.

or on Marjorie's character, which is wholly ad hoc and arbitrary, and he has no idealistic point to make about that. For Ford, it is not an ideological blindness that limits Steven and Marjorie. Indeed, in his world, there is simply no possibility of understanding. Ford's attitude toward character is simply a manifestation of a radical skepticism toward any essence--in short, an extreme existentialism.

So how can we score the competition? Does Ford mount a successful challenge to the hegemony of Hemingway as an influence in American literature? There are many ways in which one could assess the situation. For one thing, the challenge itself is meaningful. It both reminds us of, and reasserts, the status of Hemingway as a force in American literature even as it overtly claims equal status for Ford. To my mind, the homage implied outweighs the challenge itself. For Ford takes Hemingway farther in his own directions: Hemingway's existentialist views of the nature and the world become more extreme, more despairing, perhaps more indicative of the postmodernist cultural changes that have occurred since Hemingway's death in 1962, but they still seem to be a natural evolution of Hemingway's views.

This suggests, and I think it is true, that Ford's purpose is not really to shoot Hemingway down, but to elevate his own status by the comparison. The risk, however, is that we might find Ford to be disadvantaged by the comparison. For if we compare the simple pleasures of reading the stories, Hemingway wins. Hemingway's language polishes itself toward the elemental, the hypostatic, the lapidary, the opaque. Ford's language elaborates itself toward pure explanation, insinuating the rhythms of Steven's most inefficient and muddled rationalizations. The result is a sense of being immersed, however rigorously, in a totally inauthentic mind. The further point, that there simply is nothing authentic to be found in the world, is not an enjoyable lesson to learn, however necessary it may be to learn it.

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