

HEMINGWAY AND HIS PARENTS:  
THE RELATIONSHIP IN FICTION AND IN REAL LIFE

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At the core of Ernest Hemingway's philosophy of art is his assertion that "a writer's job is to tell the truth."<sup>1</sup> The simplicity of Hemingway's statement is deceptive. For one must ask his definition of truth and inquire to what degree a writer relies on direct experience or literary invention. Carlos Baker speaks to this point: "'I only know what I have seen,' was a statement which came often to [Hemingway's] lips and pen. What he had personally done, or what he knew unforgettably by having gone through one version of it, was what he was interested in telling about. This is not to say that he refused to invent freely. But he always made it a sacrosanct point to invent in terms of what he actually knew from having been there."<sup>2</sup> Hemingway once remarked to the biographer Irving Stone that there was no such thing as fiction. Ernest called his own stories "autobiographical" and told Stone how he had used "combinations of characters" to make up one character in a book. Hemingway, said Stone, "was making the point . . . that there was no such thing as pure imagination in writing, that we simply did not pull ideas and characters and concepts out of left field. He intimated that his own novels could be called biographical novels rather than pure fictional novels because they emerged out of 'lived experience.'"<sup>3</sup>

If Hemingway's stories are essentially "autobiographical," then his views of, and attitudes toward, his parents should emerge from his fiction. Such a possibility cannot fail to pique the curiosity of the reader. In Hemingway's fictional accounts of

his "hero's" parents range from equivocal, to unflattering, to damning. There is something warped in the father-son relationship when in "Fathers and Sons" Nick Adams contemplates exorcising a private devil as he thinks of his father: "If he wrote it he could get rid of it. He had gotten rid of many things by writing them."<sup>4</sup> Just as startling is John Dos Passos' remark about Hemingway: "Hem was the only man I ever knew who really hated his mother."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Ernest's feeling of alienation from and shame for, his father (and contrasting affection and respect for his grandfather) is evident in Robert Jordan's inward thought in For Whom the Bell Tolls: ". . . if there was any such thing as ever meeting [in the hereafter], both he and his grandfather would be acutely embarrassed by the presence of his father."<sup>6</sup>

Some basic assertions can be made about Ernest's fictional attitudes toward his parents. Generally, Hemingway's hero saw his mother as a domineering, intruding, sly woman who failed to understand him as a son. Toward his father, he was somewhat more ambivalent; the son acknowledged some fine qualities in his father, but could never forgive him for his lack of "manliness," both in allowing his wife to dominate him and in committing the final act of cowardice, suicide.

Actually, the fictional portraits only partly reflect reality. Threatened by his mother's dominating personality and shamed by his father's "cowardice," Hemingway, by selectivity and emphasis, pictures his parents as essentially negative personalities.

This study will discuss the nature of Hemingway's relationship with his parents by examining their fictional portraits and, through the use of biographical and critical materials, by evaluating the degree of "truth" captured in each of the portraits. Each relative will be considered separately, with the writing pertaining to each treated in order of publication, so that shifts in Hemingway's attitudes or emphases may be noted.

Grace Hall Hemingway, Ernest's mother, is given fictional life in the 1920's with the publication of In Our Time and Men Without Women. She figures prominently in three short stories: "Soldier's Home," "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife," and "Now I Lay Me."

"Soldier's Home" focuses on the mother-son relationship. The mother is unaware that her son (Harold Krebs), who has recently returned from overseas, has been profoundly changed by his wartime experiences. She still treats him like a very young child, still expects him to cater to her desires and expectations of what he should be. A number of details bear this out: she babies him by offering him breakfast in bed, nags him about mussing the paper before his father has read it, wants to know about his war experiences (but Krebs notices that her attention wanders as he tells her), and gives him permission to use the family car in the evenings. But permission is granted only after she makes it clear to her son that the car is not needed for the