

THE MOTIF OF LOSS: A UNIFYING ELEMENT OF
ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S ISLANDS IN THE STREAM

by

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In his review of Ernest Hemingway's Islands in the Stream, John Updike refers to the work as "a gallant wreck of a novel." It consists of material, Updike says, "that the author during his lifetime did not see fit to publish; therefore it should not be held against him. That parts of it are good is entirely to his credit; that other parts are puerile and, in a pained way, aimless testifies to the odds against which Hemingway, in the last two decades of his life, brought anything to completion."¹ Like many of his fellow critics who reviewed Islands shortly after its publication in fall 1970, Updike complains about the lack of editorial comment, either on the textual emendations or on the author's design of the book. Updike describes the novel as "a trio of large fragments crudely unified by a Caribbean setting and the nominal presence of Thomas Hudson. 'Bimini' is a collection of episodes that show only a groping acquaintance with one another; 'Cuba' is a lively but meandering excursion in local color that, when the painter's first wife materializes, weirdly veers into a dark and private region; and 'At Sea' is an adventure story of almost slick intensity."²

Updike comments further on the novel's lack of sharp focus. He finds Thomas Hudson to be a character who "does not grow but dwindles, from an affectionate and baffled father and artist into a rather too expertly raffish waterfront character into a bleak man-hunter, a comic-book superhuman holding unlooked-for bubbles of stoic meditation and personal sorrow."³ Along with problems of unity, Updike sees the book's connection with its author as another flaw: ". . . Islands in the Stream, even where most effective, inspires us with a worried concern for the celebrity who wrote it. His famous drinking, his methodical artistic devotions, his dawn awakenings,

his women, his cats, even his mail . . . are all there, mixed with less easily publicised strains. . . ."4

Malcolm Cowley views the author-character relationship of Hemingway and Thomas Hudson slightly differently:

Thomas Hudson is not a hero of myth. He is based on Hemingway himself . . . but in fact he represents only one side of the author: I mean the mask or persona that Hemingway adopted in his relations with the world. Thus, he is brave, competent, wise in a fatherly fashion, and able to hold his liquor--as Hemingway truly was in life--but those qualities in the author were mingled with others that make him an endless study. Hudson gives hardly a hint of having deeper qualities except for his feeling of despair, regarding which the author brings forward a drastic explanation: it was caused, he gives us to understand, by the death of Hudson's three sons. But the reader is likely to feel that the despair is of longer standing, based as it seems to be on the same feeling in the author, and that the sons have served as a blood sacrifice to the exigencies of fiction. That is the weaker side of Islands in the Stream, but one must add that it is a bold, often funny, always swashbuckling book. . . . It gives one a new respect for the efforts of his later years. Handicapped as he was by injuries and admirers, he continued almost to the end a double life, playing the great man in public--and playing the part superbly--then standing alone at his worktable, humble and persistent, while he tried to summon back his early powers.⁵

Because Cowley "read most of the original manuscript" before writing his review, he is able to fill in some of the editorial gaps of Updike's complaint. He describes the three parts of the novel as "separate stories" and applauds Charles Scribner Jr.'s and Mary Hemingway's decisions "first to publish the stories together; then to make some omissions, the longest of which is an interlude in Florida, good enough in itself, that would have made the book less unified; and finally to make no other changes except in Ernest's erratic spelling and punctuation. One is delighted to have the book in its present form."⁶

Edmund Wilson agrees with Cowley that the book should have been published. He also agrees with Updike that "the author is not to be charged