Echoes of World War I Trauma in Winner Take Nothing

Ernest Hemingway’s final collection of short stories, Winner Take Nothing, was published in 1933, was mostly disparaged by contemporary critics, and has since been largely neglected and overlooked by critics and scholars alike (Troy 182; Hemingway, Letters 400; Benson xi). I’m here today to argue for a reexamination of this collection and to make a seemingly simple claim: this collection of short stories reveals the depths to which Hemingway continued to be haunted by his traumatic experiences during the First World War fifteen years prior. The meager scholarship that does exist on Winner Take Nothing focuses almost exclusively on a few specific stories—“Fathers and Sons,” “The Light of the World,” or “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”—neglecting the other stories or failing to address the collection as a whole, especially regarding the ways in which Hemingway’s World War I experiences continue to manifest themselves throughout his fiction.

It is undeniable, first of all, that Hemingway endured traumatic experiences during his time serving the American Red Cross, assisting Italian forces in World War I, and I believe that a closer examination of how he explicitly treats this material in his personal correspondence and fiction will reveal ways with which he continued to retell and relive these experiences implicitly even in his fiction written over a decade later. Examining these texts through the perspective of trauma theory provides a framework for approaching Hemingway texts that do not explicitly reference or prioritize warfare. My aim is to discover how Hemingway’s World War I traumas echo throughout his literary career, manifesting themselves specifically in the short stories of Winner Take Nothing but also allowing for further inquiry into other Hemingway texts that have been traditionally overlooked in terms of his World War I experiences.
Although trench warfare and the constant threat of imminent violence and death would have been traumatic in general (Morris 25), I’d like to highlight two specific events which appear in Hemingway’s biographies and letters and later reappear in his fiction. On the day he arrived in Milan, Hemingway was dispatched to a nearby munitions factory that had exploded and was ordered to collect fragmented body parts from the barbed wire fence surrounding the factory (Meyers 29; Philbrick 32-33). Secondly, on July 8, 1918, an enemy shell exploded about three feet from Hemingway at Fossalta de Piave, eviscerating the soldier standing between Hemingway and the shell. Hemingway was badly wounded by shrapnel, and a third soldier lost his legs in the explosion (Meyers 30-31).

Hemingway eventually had over two hundred pieces of shrapnel removed from his legs (Meyers 31). At this time, shrapnel was a very real threat, responsible for six out of every ten deaths thus far in the war. In an age before antibiotics, shrapnel wounds could often result in infection, amputation, or death (Morris 54). Hemingway’s first love, the American nurse Agnes von Kurowsky, remembers Hemingway as brave and upbeat but still not immune from anxieties regarding potential amputation, even claiming that she witnessed him regularly using a pen knife to dig remaining pieces of shrapnel from his leg (Meyers 36-37). Splinters in his hands made it impossible for him to write for two weeks (Morris 54), which suggests that weeks after his wounding, Hemingway was still searching for shrapnel.

In his first letters to his family after his wounding, Hemingway seems casual, celebrating the number of dangers to which he has been exposed and the fact that he is the first American wounded in Italy, a fact that is widely contested. Despite his tone, however, aspects of these letters reveal somber reflections on war and a keen awareness of the man whose death saved his life: “You know they say there isn’t anything funny about this war. And there isn’t…. Shells
aren’t bad except direct hits. You must take chances on the fragments of the bursts. But when there is a direct hit your pals get spattered all over you. Spattered is literal” (Hemingway, *Letters* 14). Only years later, in other private letters, would he openly admit having been terrified during and after the ordeal (Meyers 30).

Now, typical responses to danger involve adaptive reactions comprising what we commonly refer to as the “fight or flight” reflex (Herman 34). Trauma, in contrast, occurs when these typical responses are insufficient. To quote Judith Herman: “When neither resistance nor escape is possible, the human system of self-defense becomes overwhelmed and disorganized. Each component of the ordinary response to danger, having lost its utility, tends to persist in an altered and exaggerated state long after the actual danger is over” (34). Herman delineates the “profound and lasting changes in physiological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory” (34), which can include feelings of intense emotion without a clear memory, vivid remembrance devoid of emotion, a state of constant vigilance, and the unexpected intrusion of the traumatic memory into the victim’s present (35).

Despite Hemingway’s supposed bravado during his convalescence in Italy, evidence suggests his wartime experiences scarred his psyche as much as his body. Debra Jackson discusses the period of latency between a traumatic event and its complete emotional impact, a delay period that can range from hours to decades and, in her words, “traps the survivor in a cycle of repetitions and reenactments that makes the traumatic event contemporaneous with the present” (206-207). As Hemingway returned home in January of 1919, this latency period seemed to end (Meyers 40). According to Jeffrey Meyers, Hemingway’s mental state declined after the excitement of his homecoming. Hemingway described himself as “spooked,” suffering from insomnia, drinking to go to sleep, and having his sister Ursula lay beside him in bed while
they slept with the light on. According to Meyers, because Hemingway had been wounded in the dark, he associated darkness with death (48).

Several years after his homecoming, Hemingway was obviously still grappling with his World War I experiences by writing such works as *The Sun Also Rises* from 1926 and, most explicitly, *A Farewell to Arms*, published in 1929 while he was composing the stories of *Winner Take Nothing*. The title itself is an obvious reversal of the phrase “winner take all,” a type of competition in which small differences in performance lead to a large or total reward. The phrase is first attested from 1901 (Harper) and was popular enough to serve as the title for the well-known 1932 film, released when Hemingway was debating the title for *his* upcoming collection (Hemingway, *Letters* 393). In contrast to the film’s celebration of manly violence and self-sacrifice (“*Winner Take All*”), Hemingway’s collection depicts a world of endless repetition and loss. Cayetano, the gambling Mexican in the story “The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio,” is in the hospital after winning a card game and subsequently being shot by his opponent. He realizes he is destined to lose but refuses to stop despite this fact: “When I make a sum of money I gamble and when I gamble I lose” (365-66).

This collection of short stories is ultimately a struggle to survive in a world that is unfair, a world in which the cards are stacked against the players, a world of random and meaningless violence and trauma, manifested in reenactments of illness, violence, death, dismemberment, insomnia, depression, fractured relationships, and intrusive memories. The opening story, “After the Storm” is a dreamlike dramatic monologue in which the narrator stumbles upon a sunken ocean liner and attempts to plunder the valuables within. While swimming around the liner, the narrator continuously references but refuses to identify mysterious “pieces of things floating” in the water and being scavenged by countless birds (284, 285). Only in the story’s conclusion does
the narrator finally confront the reality that he has been swimming through the gory remains of
the dead passengers of the liner, remains now being scavenged by the birds (286). In his final
lament, “Even the birds got more out of her than I did” (287), the narrator conflates himself with
the birds, both scavengers of the dead, imagery that recalls Hemingway’s experiences collecting
body fragments on his first day in Milan.

James McGrath Morris draws a grim picture of the scene in his biography of
Hemingway: “Arms, legs, backs, torsos, heads, and bits of hair clung to the barbed-wire fence
surrounding the place…. The first thing [he] saw was the headless and legless body of a woman
whose intestines lay exposed” (40). The only dead body the narrator of “After the Storm” ever
explicitly acknowledges is the lone female corpse he sees floating within the sunken liner.
Because of the surreal nature of the story, its repeated indirect references to body fragments, and
the narrator’s fixation on this lone woman, the story itself reads like a nightmarish flashback to
Hemingway’s first day in Milan.

Whether Hemingway consciously or unconsciously mimicked such imagery is irrelevant.
The mimicry is there all the same. Judith Herman explains the way in which traumatic moments
from one’s past intrude into one’s present: “It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma. The
traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks
spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic
nightmares during sleep” (37). Ultimately, we form our identities by creating a verbal and linear
narrative of our lives. Traumatic memories are encoded in “vivid sensations and images”
(Herman 38), lack verbal context, resist this psychological narration, and shatter our attempts to
construct any coherent vision of our history or identity (Herman 37-39). In a subconscious
attempt to integrate these events into our narratives, again to quote Herman, “traumatized people
find themselves reenacting some aspect of the trauma in disguised form, without realizing what they are doing” (40), which may explain Hemingway’s compulsive reenactments of his World War I experiences.

Alternatively, Debra Jackson discusses the importance of testimony for victims of trauma, constructing a narrative of the event in order to heal: “Telling one’s story to empathetic others facilitates the recovery process by granting the narrator the distance necessary to empathize with her [or his] own self” (212). In a similar vein, Marc Seals argues that “for Hemingway, writing and traumatic memory were inextricably linked; trauma provided material for his writing, and writing provided a therapeutic outlet for trauma” (18).

Two of the fourteen stories in Winner Take Nothing explicitly reference warfare and are obvious autobiographical accounts taken from Hemingway’s time in World War I, and I believe their inclusion in this collection only strengthens my argument. Hemingway composed all of these stories during roughly the same time (from 1928 to 1932), which means that while he was composing the remaining twelve stories which rarely, if ever, explicitly reference warfare, he was also thinking back on his experiences in Italy in 1918.

In “A Natural History of the Dead,” Hemingway presents a scene in which soldiers collect fragmented body parts after a munitions factory explosion in Milan, stating that such experiences carry with them a “quality of unreality” (337). His description of the detachment with which such events are experienced and recalled manifests the disassociation Judith Herman describes: “The heat, the flies, the indicative positions of the bodies in the grass, and the amount of paper scattered are the impressions one retains…. you remember things that happened, but the sensation cannot be recalled” (337-38).
Even more telling is the inability to keep the dead buried, a poignant metaphor for a writer struggling with a traumatic wartime past. Hemingway mentions the rains that wash away the mud from the buried dead or the melting snows that similarly unveil formerly buried corpses (339). This trope of the unburied dead reappears in the other story that explicitly references warfare, “A Way You’ll Never Be,” another clearly autobiographical sketch in which Nick Adams relives the same duties Hemingway was carrying out when he was wounded. As Nick surveys the aftermath of a battle, he ponders the piles of anonymous corpses (306). In both this scene and in “A Natural History of the Dead,” Hemingway emphasizes the scattered papers around the corpses and the pockets on the uniforms of the dead (337), suggesting the fact that he is recreating the same image or revisiting the same memory.

The character of Nick Adams mentions having previously been wounded in battle and seems to struggle with insomnia and nightmares (311). His anxiety peaks during a conversation at the story’s end, when Nick, confronted with the prospect of traveling at night, can no longer restrain himself and compulsively demands to know why the soldiers won’t bury the dead (314), conflating notions of darkness with mortality.

The unburied dead appear yet again in “The Mother of a Queen,” in which a bullfighter chooses to only pay for his mother’s cemetery plot through installments. Despite persistent notices that “his mother’s grave would be opened and her remains dumped on the common bone-heap” (316) if he fails to pay the next installment, the bullfighter ignores the notices. When his perplexed manager demands an explanation, the fighter’s words suggest a desire to avoid the reality and pain of loss: “Now she is so much dearer to me. Now I don’t have to think of her buried in one place and be sad. Now she is all about me in the air…. Now she will always be with me” (317). This image, combined with the later image of the bullfighter’s overstuffed
luggage bursting (318), suggests the notion of a grief that, paradoxically, cannot be contained, located, or accessed.

Meanwhile, in “God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen,” a boy uses a razor to “amputate” (300) his own phallus in a misguided and desperate attempt to rid himself of what he labels his “awful lust” (299) and a “sin against purity” (299) that keeps him awake all night in frantic prayer. This extreme form of self-mutilation and punishment is a reaction to insomnia, self-loathing, and guilt, all conditions common to those suffering from trauma (Herman 44; Jackson 207). It’s also worth noting that Hemingway claims to have been shot twice through the scrotum during the war, although he makes sure to clarify that his genitals remained intact (Meyers 33).

Another story of a boy’s fatal anxieties is “A Day’s Wait” in which a young boy who has a fever misinterprets his temperature and stoically spends a day awaiting his certain demise in vain (332-34). Both stories are marked by this male adolescent insomnia and an omnipresent anxiety regarding mortality. This focus on childhood death may seem odd, but its inclusion makes more sense considering a line from “A Natural History of the Dead” in which the narrator explains how to recognize that a soldier is about to die, stating that “at the end he turns to be a little child again” (338).

Judith Herman and Debra Jackson both discuss the manner in which a trauma victim may feel ashamed, humiliated, stripped of agency or personhood, objectified, and reduced to a childlike state (Herman 40, 47; Jackson 208-215). For Hemingway, a dying soldier looks like a man reduced to a child; perhaps a child, when traumatic memory intrudes into his contemporaneous present, reminds him of a dying soldier.

This intrusion of traumatic memory continues in the story “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” which consists of contrasting pairs: an old and young waiter, insomnia and sleep, despair
and hope, loneliness and companionship. Like Nick Adams in “A Way You’ll Never Be,” the old waiter is haunted by an unspeakable fear of the lonely night, keeping him at the café until the dawn: “I am of those who like to stay late at the café…[w]ith all of those who do not want to go to bed. With all those who need a light for the night” (290). Like Nick, like the two unnamed boys in “Merry Gentlemen” and “A Day’s Wait,” like Hemingway himself after returning home from the war, the old waiter suffers insomnia and relates to the elderly, deaf widower lingering in the café, a man who recently attempted suicide as a result of his own grief and loneliness.

Meanwhile, the young waiter’s impatience to return home to his wife is undermined by a brief mention of another young couple, an anonymous soldier and prostitute who pass by the café, conflating the notions of companionship with war, mortality, and exploitation (288). This conflation is underscored by a later story titled “One Reader Writers,” which describes a wife’s concerns over the syphilis her husband contracted while serving overseas in the military (320). The syphilitic husband could very well be a stand-in for the soldier we see passing by the “Clean, Well-Lighted Place.” Throughout the entire collection, interpersonal relationships are challenged, broken, and undermined, reflecting the fractured identities and relationships resultant from traumatic experiences (Herman 47-51). The stories all subtly reenact scenes of violence, traumatic grief, and a general disillusionment or loss of faith, all of which are further echoes of Hemingway’s own wartime experiences, notions already evident in a letter Hemingway wrote to his parents only months after his wounding (Hemingway, Letters 19).

If the collection begins in a nightmarish darkness, it ends with Hemingway’s arguable stand-in, Nick Adams, struggling to come to terms with his own mortality. Nick, now home from the war, raising a son, and grieving his father’s death, must answer his son’s questions about visiting his grandfather’s tomb, questions which eventually lead to speculations about someday
visiting his father’s tomb, Nick’s tomb (366-67). In this scene, Nick is forced to confront past and present grief: “If he wrote it he could get rid of it. He had gotten rid of many things by writing them” (371). The collection, which opens with a nightmarish flashback, closes with a daytime drive and a consideration of the possibility of healing.

Hemingway once wrote that imagination is necessary and vital for a writer but deadly to a soldier. He stated that bravery just meant suspending your own imagination, that war required a soldier to ignore—what we might, today, term “repress”—the very realistic possibilities of impending death (Meyers 30). If surviving the war meant repressing his imagination, his ability to fear, then recovering from the traumatic experiences of the war meant accessing those repressed fears through the power of invention. It only stands to reason that Hemingway would use his craft of invention in an attempt to revisit his own traumatic memories.

Examining this collection and other Hemingway works through the lens of trauma theory is not the only appropriate or useful perspective, but it is a vital one that must be embraced and included in our approaches to his work if we are to fully appreciate the richness and depth of his stories, which are battlefields—some more obvious than others—in which he constantly wrestled with his past wartime traumas in a winner-take-nothing competition.
Works Cited


“Winner Take All (1932).” IMDb, 11 Nov. 2017,