

# HOW IS CLASSICAL LITERATURE DEPICTED VISUALLY?

## – ADAPTATIONS OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY’S MODERNIST PROSE FOR THE SILVER SCREEN.

**Emilie Holmes**

Nottingham Trent University

English (BA) Hons

N1195755@my.ntu.ac.uk

### **Abstract:**

Ernest Hemingway’s engagement in the modernist movement produced minimalist yet visionary prose which often had the background of war. This poses a unique challenge for filmmakers adapting Hemingway’s nuanced plotlines and narrative techniques into visual storytelling. Comparing classic novels such as *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) to its on-screen adaptation in 1957 exposes the conventional simplification of storytelling from Hollywood studios that cater to mass audiences, indifferent to Hemingway’s readership. The use of cinematography and film shots in these visual adaptations, such as in *The Old Man and the Sea* (1958), attempt to translate meaning. This film creates an awareness of the passing of time through lighting and wide shots, similar to how Hemingway depicts these scenes through writing. Whereas the film adaptation of *To Have and Have Not* (1944), starring Humphrey Bogart, arguably rewrites the entire plot. The film’s emphasis on romance and heroism is far more apparent than the internal complexities of the characters, in contrast to the 1937 novel. The visual adaptations of Hemingway’s historical literature highlight the reality of translating complex literary themes into film. Balancing the essence of an original text with the challenges of the visual medium can create the art of adapting modernist prose into cinema.

### **Keywords:**

Film, History, War, Hollywood, Modernism.

### The Sun Also Rises

There’s an indisputable theme of prolonging the end of pleasure in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), this theme of time and escapism is also apparent in the 1957 film adaptation, directed by Henry King. In the opening of the novel, Robert Cohn asks Jake Barnes if he will go to South America with him. Robert asks ‘Don’t you ever get the feeling that half of your life is going by and you’re not taking advantage of it’, this

being in the novel's opening promotes Hemingway's reaching out directly to the readership. The repeated use of the direct personal pronoun ‘you’ makes this intimate and direct, as if the reader is individually called upon, like Jake Barnes. This could be interpreted as a use of authorial intrusion which sets the tone of the entire narrative by willing the lost generation to carry on living after the hardship of war. This idea is foregrounded in Jake's response ‘You can’t get away from yourself by

moving from one place to another' which is ironic because that is the epitome of the whole novel as they flee to Pamplona and San Sebastian. Hemingway uses satirical intent and obvious critique of his character's livelihoods to steer his readership from acting correspondingly, he urges the characters in his novel and those who read it to offer themselves to life as a bullfighter does to a force that will eventually end him, but for a time can learn to master and control.<sup>1</sup> In the film adaptation, the *misé-en-scène* is significant in this scene as Cohn enters Jake's office, it is as if Cohn is literally deriving Jake from his place of work, which therefore could be a metaphor for disabling Jake from creating a life for himself after WW1. Cohn also falls asleep in Jake's office which visually insinuates the unconsciousness of the lost generation, the theme of sleep is a motif throughout the novel and the film and so is the continuous consumption of alcohol, prolonged meal times and fighting.

Hemingway uses narrative devices of digression and repetition to display the procrastination and fear of a society unable to redirect themselves, American writer Reynolds Price believes Hemingway is representing 'the demand to survive the end of pleasure.'<sup>2</sup> Even in the character arcs there is self-inflicted purgatory. Jake, Cohn, Mike and Brett are each tangled in their affections and desire for one another and are ultimately trapped by their own irresolution. Because of their indecision, the characters remain in turmoil. For example, even with Jake's implied

impotence, he tortures himself by being in close proximity to the woman he loves.

The theme of overindulgence is portrayed in the mere description of absinth, it's labelled as 'pleasantly bitter' and it 'has a good uplift but drops you just as far.' I could argue that Hemingway is not just referring to alcohol and that it's an analogy for all the vices that delay the end of pleasure. Excessive drinking is also depicted in the film, there's even one sequence where Lady Ashley (Ava Gardner) and Jake (Tyrone Power) go to one bar after another. The characters are always present in bars, restaurants and cafes, and even in their bedrooms, their place of rest, they remain drinking alcohol. Some film critics believed the character's deferral was lost when visually adapted, it could get tedious watching the characters drink and fight scene after scene in comparison to when they are rendered in Hemingway's beautifully spare prose<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the characters being reimaged by middle-aged actors also diminished the evocation of the young adults of the novel who were trying to make sense of a world ravaged by a great war.<sup>4</sup>

The novel embodies a society beset by the residue of WWI as it's more of a book of memory than action.<sup>5</sup> The protagonist is wounded by the remains of war, making the fiesta particularly reminiscent of wartime for Jake. The Pamplona fiesta is depicted as an overstimulating chaos of celebration: 'There was a wind blowing. The military band was playing...the magnesium flared and the fireworks exploded and

chased about in the crowd,' this description is comparable to wartime due to its visual and auditory eruption, Jake even makes a correlation between the 'explosion of rockets to shrapnel bursts'.<sup>6</sup>Correspondingly, in the film, there are shots of booming fireworks, bright lights and streamers. There are also establishing shots of people dancing in the street to loud music, these long shots capture the essence of life and its experience the generation was so hesitant to fulfil after WWI and arguably after WWII as well, as unlike the novel, the film was produced after both wars. The film similarly represents the disillusionment of post-war society, although the effect is somewhat undetermined by the film's large production company, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. By prioritising the film's palatability to a wide audience, the film house struggles to rival the exploration of the human condition that is so prominent in the novel. However, the use of editing in the film was effective in portraying the influence of war on memory. There is a match-dissolve cut when Jake is in his bed. He stares at the ceiling then the shot fades to his former hospital bed, where Brett is tending to him. This is effective because dreams hold the subconscious, so his dream implies that being near Brett not only reminds him of the war but also reminds him of his unrequited love. I believe this is reflective of Hemingway's writing, as he conveyed in the novel the damage wrought by war but also the impossibility of finding true love in the modern world.<sup>7</sup>

In Hemingway's work, there is always the background of war; either one which has been recently concluded or one that is going on<sup>8</sup>. With this in mind, the war that is going on in the novel is the one in Jake's mind and this plausibly concludes when he visits San Sebastian, in the end. The new setting acts as a place of truth and restoration for Jake, he describes 'The car was powdered with dust. I rubbed the rod-case through the dust. It seemed the last thing that connected me with Spain'. Not only does this imply he is reverting back to simple pleasures, like fishing, but it also implies he is leaving the fiesta behind him and therefore leaving the memory of war behind him too. The delicate imagery of dust being discarded portrays the impermanence and ease of moving on, but the process is also framed as one requiring physical engagement, like Jake's hand discarding the dust from the rod-case. It is particularly important that we see through Jake's eyes in the narrative, like an optical instrument<sup>9</sup>, because his character demonstrates the capacity to move out of stagnancy. The film comparably demonstrates Jake's forward motion in the ending. When he is on the beach he receives a telegram from Brett, willing him to come and help her, so he does. The telegram represents responsibility and Jake doing what is asked of him, as opposed to drinking his life away. Jake's power of vision modifying<sup>10</sup> what is perceived in the novel and him being the lead protagonist in the film, makes it imperative that the observer is witness to someone who was paralysed by the aftermath of the war but is now

able to find new direction in a lost generation, which ultimately urges the readership to do the same.

### To Have and Have Not

Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1937) is a novel that explores the complexities of the human condition through minimalist prose, presenting characters' existentialism and a fragmented post-war world following a lost generation. In contrast, Howard Hawks' Hollywood major motion studio film adaptation (1944) retains certain elements from the novel but is more of a romantic thriller and reinterprets the narrative with an action-driven plot due to its Hollywoodization.

The opening scenes of *To Have and Have Not* in both the novel and the film reflect the bleak, post-war atmosphere that pervades the narrative. In the novel, the opening dialogue between Pancho and Harry Morgan reveals the bitterness of a society disillusioned by war: "Don't be so tough so early in the morning. I'm sure you've cut plenty of people's throats. I haven't even had my coffee yet." This conveys the cynicism of a generation hardened by conflict and loss. Whereas the film's opening uses an illustrated map of Martinique accompanied by the text "Martinique in the summer of 1940, shortly after the fall of France," which situates the story in a completely different geographical context compared to the novel, which is set during the Great Depression in Key West, Florida. This shift from the economic struggles of the Great Depression and the turmoil of WWII transforms the focus of the narrative

from class conflict to wartime heroism, as in Martinique the focus of context is on the French Revolution.

Hemingway's novel, with its limited dialogue and evaluation of internal conflict, reflects a world where the external violence of war is reflected by internal turmoil. However, in Hawks' film, this tone is significantly softened. Rather than encapsulating the raw bleakness of post-war life, the film introduces a more upbeat atmosphere through *mise-én-scène* and a romanticised version of Harry Morgan's character arc. The film's use of cheerful music and fight scenes heavily contrasts with the novel's existentialism and instead emphasises the romance-thriller genre, which is conventional for Hollywood's wartime propaganda.<sup>11</sup> In the novel, Harry Morgan is portrayed as a cynical, ambitious man who survives through smuggling and makeshift work. Harry's character is an embodiment of post-WWII pragmatism, this is evident in his dialogue "But let me tell you, my kids ain't going to have to have their bellies hurt and I ain't going to dig sewers for the government for less money than will feed them." Harry's relationship with Marie is honest and reflective of a post-war marriage as they work together for their family. Moreover, Harry is ambitious but cold and forced to be pragmatic in a world that does not care for him. In contrast, Humphrey Bogart's portrayal of Harry in the film adaptation is much more romanticised as he is charismatic, however, the film still maintains some of the original character's vigilance and Bogart

conventionally embodies the stereotypical American anti-hero.

The visual adaptation of the novel represents Harry's relationship with Marie as a mere romantic plot device, whereas in the novel the couple are already married with three daughters. The reimagination of the couple is conventional of Hollywood's approach to adapting literature for a wider audience, it is typical of Hollywood to simplify complex characters to fit the expectations of cinematic genres.<sup>12</sup> Marie's role in the novel focuses on the effects of familial struggles as opposed to her centred sexual allure in the film. Her character explores the themes of motherhood, the economic struggles of the Great Depression and personal sacrifice. However, Marie is reinterpreted in the film as a 22-year-old bachelorette, played by Lauren Bacall. The transparent shift in age and marital status adapts Marie's character into a stereotypical femme fatale. The sexualisation of Bacall's character is a clear example of Laura Mulvey's theory of the 'Male gaze', as she is represented primarily as an object of desire. Moreover, the use of costume and physical appearance diminishes the nuanced depiction of Marie's character in the novel, reducing her to a mere romantic interest rather than a partner navigating the hardships of life with her husband.<sup>13</sup>

In the novel Harry Morgan grapples with the difficult choices of survival and moral compromise, Hemingway uses Harry's internal dialogue to depict this: "What chance have I to enjoy my home? Why am

I back to worse than where I started?" Delving into his inner psyche gives the audience an insight into Harry's relentless struggle for a better life. The film adaptation simplifies the protagonist's existentialism by focusing on an action-driven plot. Furthermore, the use of ominous music and extreme use of fog during the boat trip, in the film, creates a tense visual atmosphere that represents the external dangers Harry faces. Whereas, in the novel, Harry's struggle is more internal and rooted in psychological isolation and resentment of society.

Though the limitations of cinema make it inevitable to depict external conflicts with more ease than internal conflicts, the focus on visual adaptations overshadows Hemingway's modernist prose that explores psychological realism. However, the ending of the film is effective in reflecting Hemingway's message in the novel, which is to find direction in a lost generation. There's a final long shot of Harry, Marie, and Eddy walking out of a bar with their bags packed signifying their shift in direction, they are arguably not part of a lost generation anymore and have now found their purpose in aiding the French resistance. In contrast, Hemingway's novel ends on a note of ambiguity which conveys the inherent uncertainty of the human condition. Marie contemplates her future now that her husband is dead. There's a comparison between a yacht to a small tanker in the harbour which implies that there's always something more beneath the surface, as they float like the bulk of an iceberg, concluding with

ambiguity offers a fitting counterbalance in the novel's politics.<sup>14</sup>

### The Old Man and The Sea

The 1952 novel exposes the power of thought through narrative devices such as internal monologue which unveils the protagonist's stream of consciousness. Santiago believes 'If others heard me talking out loud they would think I'm crazy...but since I am not crazy, I do not care.' This suggests the art of being alone and his individualism. Hemingway demonstrates the power of being true to oneself and that cowardice consists not of breaking out of societal normality but continuing within it<sup>15</sup>. The 1958 film adaption, directed by John Sturge, portrays the Old Man's perseverance through the asynchronous second-person narration, narrated by the lead actor himself, Spencer Tracy. This is an effective use of *misé-en-scène* because the script pays homage to Hemingway's literature as the dialogue is almost identical to the original text. The narration also makes the film more personal because it's as if the Old Man is relaying the memory of a story, perhaps to The Boy. The stream of consciousness evolved from the modernist literary movement, and though this is a short novel, the unfiltered display of the man's internal thoughts depicts the importance of benevolence and resilience. Santiago tells himself 'If you do not sleep you might become unclear in the head' and 'It is silly not to have hope...besides, I believe it is a sin.' These moments of 'good counsel' portray the power thoughts have to shift perspective. This is also evident in the film through shot

types, there is a point-of-view shot from the Old Man's eye line, and his vision is blurred and disorientated but moments after this he is able to defend the marlin ruthlessly from the sharks by being inventive and attaching a knife to an oar. Moreover, the dialogue at that moment is pivotal in both the novel and the film: 'Now is no time to think of what you do not have. Think of what you can do with what there is.' Hemingway emphasises the significance of versatility in order to be tenacious, not only at sea but to the individual. This is reinforced in the reception of the novel, the story even personally affected Hemingway, in an interview he stated 'Don't you think it's a strange, damn story that it should affect all of us? (me especially the way it does?)' This implies the humane determination we all have to face in our lives.

Throughout both mediums of the story, the theme of nature is prevalent in expressing benevolence. There is frequent personification: 'Why did they make birds so delicate and fine as these sea swallows when the ocean can be so cruel? She is kind and very beautiful, but she can be so cruel and it comes suddenly.' On one hand, this demonstrates the importance of gratitude towards the breathing world we come from. On another hand, Hemingway could be figuratively comparing the 'delicate birds' to human fragility and the 'cruel ocean' to life's experiences that come 'suddenly' which we are not prepared for. In the film, this speech is presented identically alongside an asynchronous upbeat score which creates curiosity about the vastness

of the sea surrounding Santiago. The intimate moment with the warbler bird in the novel is transformed parallelly from the page to the silver screen, the Old Man tells the bird 'Take a rest then go in and take your chance' This depicts benevolence to the natural world and represents the harmony in nature due to the degrees of value. The Old Man's tender description of birds and fish highly contrasts with those of sharks, which underlines the two orders in every species: The great marlins and the lesser species, such as the great sharks depicted as attacking with sly indirectness<sup>16</sup>. Alternatively, the reassurance Santiago gives the bird could be an inward message to the individual, that it's imperative to have self-compassion for perseverance.

The use of *mise-én-scène* in the film adaptation pays homage to the romanticism of the natural world in the novel, Sturge uses wide establishing shots to portray the man alone at sea, however it is evident he is not alone due to the additional stars, and fish and the vast ocean. Though some might argue there are dull moments of no action, especially in comparison to the scenes depicted in Hemingway's visionary prose, these scenes are vital to portray the love letter to nature, and fishing but also to patience and forbearance<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, the film's use of music, which won best scoring of a dramatic picture in 1958, ameliorates the visual essence by using romantic and whimsical scores in exciting moments, the composer Dimitri Tiomkin creates a curious lust for life through sound.

Arguably, there is an element of pantheism in this story which is evident through Hemingway's gratitude to the living world: 'I am glad we do not have to kill the stars. Imagine if each day a man must have to try and kill the moon. The moon runs away, he thought. But imagine if a man each day should try and kill the sun.' The lunar and light imagery expresses the universal resonance of human gratitude to the same marvellous solar system we coincide with. The use of lighting in the film is pivotal for the portrayal of tenacity, the sun rises and sets on the sea continuously and so do the stars in the night sky, this represents the repeated passing of time and implies that no matter how much time has passed it's never too late to prevail. Moreover, similarly to how there are two hierarchal orders of animal species, Hemingway represents two hierarchs of men, those who dare more to expose themselves to greater dangers of the possibility of defeat and those who don't.<sup>18</sup>

In the novel, there's a continuous theme of imagination and a motif of dreams which concludes the story in a cyclical structure. In the opening, the Old Man 'no longer dreamed of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of his wife.' Instead 'he only dreamed of places now, and of lions on the beach.' This demonstrates the power of imagination because although this alludes to his passing wife and 'great occurrences' such as war, he is able to shift his perspective to the canary islands, which symbolises

peace and free spirit, like the 'young cats' he watches play in the dusk. The adaptation of Santiago's dreams is enhanced through visual elements in the film, to help convey the connection imagination has with shifting one's perspective. In the first dream, there's a fade to a montage of white beaches and cubs which visually demonstrates the shift and peace the Old Man is experiencing. The second dream takes place on the boat where the Old Man similarly imagines young cubs on long yellow beaches which is significant because though the man is exhausted, his repeated dream alludes to the stealth of his determination and that his perspective is fixed. In addition to this, the young lion cubs are oxymoronic to the man's old age, this could symbolise his loss of youth and pride, however, he remains determined, and this is further shown in the film's illusive musical score creating a tone of resoluteness and prevalence. The novel concludes with a third dream; Hemingway's use of careful structure and extreme precision help shape and balance the novel however, the depth it carries is inconceivable as the

reader becomes immersed in not only the physical challenges the man experiences at sea but also the emotional tragedy of ageing and loneliness<sup>19</sup>. The concluding dream is significant in portraying the contrast between the young boy and the old man. In the film, the young boy (played by Felipe Pazos) sat beside Santiago 'watching him' whilst 'the Old Man was dreaming about the lions.' This represents the regression and dependability that come with ageing and encourages moments of vulnerability despite one's pride. In addition to this, because sleep is related to the conscience it implies the man remains at peace despite his turmoil at sea and highlights his exhaustion not just from the trip but also the burden of life and age, that he has carried tremendously. The Old Man remains dreaming of lions which emphasises how he has survived the lonely ordeal he has gone through without becoming bitter or hostile, this ultimately fortifies Hemingway's judgement that 'A man can be destroyed but not defeated.'<sup>20</sup>

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