

The Just and the Unjust: Ernest Hemingway and Protest Literature in Response to Civil Disobedience in the Context of the Two World Wars

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The Just and the Unjust: Ernest Hemingway and Protest Literature in Response to Civil
Disobedience in the Context of the Two World Wars.

The expansion of concerns about institutionalized authorities has never ceased to be an essence of the evolution in the contemporary world; such an urge for questioning authorities becomes rather more and more inclusive, in which activists voiced up against unjust treatments, educations, and stereotypes, to name but a few. Yet, one of the subjects that people tend to avoid or to be fearful of questioning is the legislative authority in general, and the government in particular. The explanation for this phenomenon lies in the legislative paperworks which state that it is and must be a civilian duty to obey the laws mentioned by institutionalized authority. Further than ameliorating a sense of followance and self-disciplines, obedience is rather enforced by punishments and penalties for any individual that does otherwise. However, there are situations when the justification of authorized enforcement is at stake, and protest literature has to take a stand to question such enforcement. In his writing "Civil Disobedience," Henry David Thoreau claimed that: "the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are

physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it” (Thoreau).

As a matter of fact, protest literature creates an even stronger argument by urging the awareness that moral conscience must be taken into consideration before one chooses to obey the law. Other than morality, there is no definite criteria to evaluate a law to stand on the side of justice or not. Specifically, in creating two novels *In Our Time* and *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway responds to Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” and Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* in a manner of stating that: By obeying unjust laws, human beings give up their own opportunity to live in a humane world. Henceforth, the two World Wars stand remarkably as situations that conscience of morality has to be placed on top of obedience to ensure the essence of human existence, and a failure to do so led to not only the deaths and exhaustions worldwide but also the collapse of human love and human responsibility to love.

One ultimate role that protest literature employs is to acknowledge Thoreau’s vocation: “Unjust law exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them. And obey them until we have succeeded. Or shall we transgress them at once?” (Thoreau). Yet, in order to seek for an answer to Thoreau’s question, it is primary to provide concrete distinctions, if not definitions, between just and unjust laws. Martin Luther King Jr. in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* mentioned: “Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust” (King). Oftenly, laws are associated with justice, as they archetypally set the standards for human ethics and behaviours in a society. However, there are times, as King insisted, when “law is just on its face and unjust is in its application,” in other words, law is used as a means for injustice to be passed through (King). As a consequence, an

instinctive obedience to laws without any consideration leads to the unstoppable spread of injustice, and one may see such consequence most clearly through the effects of wars: “A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart” (Thoreau).

From the year of 1914 to 1945, the world witnessed, one dares say, the most two lethal wars throughout human history, as a result of such “undue respect for law” (Thoreau). Citizens of the United States of America, specifically, contributed in this international act of killing because of a national scheme to gain world power, concealed under the name of ‘patriotism’ and ‘democracy.’ On April 6th, 1917, following the addressing of President Wilson to the Congress, the United States declared the official involvement in the Great War, against Germany, with a claim that: “The world must be made safe for democracy.” With the aid of the Selective Service Act being passed on May 18th, 1917, 2.8 million men between the age of 21 to 30 had been recruited to the army and praised as patriots (“The US”). One outcome the democracy of America did not expect was that the end of World War I called to a chain of tragedies that haunted the entire nation, namely the Great Depression and the entering of the World War II, with the estimation of “50 million military and civilian deaths, including those of 6 million Jews” (World).

In order to versatily analyse these events, it is as well crucial to apply the lens of the soldiers who enrolled in the war, who believed that they were responding to their national call of democracy by obeying the law and contributing in the massacres and killings. In the book

Embattled Home Fronts: Domestic Politics and the American novel of World War I, Karsten Helge Piep mentioned that Ernest Hemingway himself used to see his call to arms as a nature of his defined identity as an American citizen: “I went because I wanted to go”, Hemingway declared: “I was big and strong, my country needed me, and I went and did whatever I was told – and anything I did outside of that was simply my duty” (Piep 84). Yet, in his novels published after his war experience, outstandingly *In Our Time* and *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway showed none of the content in serving the law of his country but a recurring regret, corresponding with Thoreau’s evaluation of the warriors: “The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, posse comitatus, etc. ... [T]hey put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones” (Thoreau). By depicting the post-war experience of his two protagonists Nick Adams in *In Our Time*, and Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* — two veterans who joined the war and came back with their physical health and mental health disturbed — Hemingway’s two novels voiced up against the war regimes not on a macro level but rather narrowed the scope down to personal stories which in fact depicted vividly and credibly the experiences of soldiers during the war and veterans as they walk out of the war, struggling to adapt into an entirely new world that was completely turned over.

While veterans in the novels remained silent about their war experience, the chain of italicized chapters in *In Our Time* recreated the scenes on the battlefields. Yet, it is not simply a shooting scene, but a scene of the soldiers giving up their notion of “other humans” and adopting a profane understanding of life and death. Chapter III begins with a series of graphic descriptions: “The first German I saw climbed up over the garden wall. We waited till he got one

leg over and then potted him. ... Then three more came over further down the wall. We shot them. They all came just like that” (Hemingway, *In* 29). This is, in fact, a recreation of a hunting scene where the hunter wait to “pot” an animal, while none of the human characteristics is shown in the description of the German that was killed. What Chapter III indicates is an instinctive attitude that the soldiers employed to adapt themselves to the killings, which is to dehumanize other human beings on the other side of the frontier, and to deceive themselves by imagining battles as hunting sites. The deception proceeds even further to the side of sin-making in Chapter IV when the soldiers started to find pleasures in being able to kill: “It was simply priceless. ... It was absolutely topping. ... We were frightfully put out when we heard the flank had gone, and we had to fall back” (Hemingway, *In* 37). When Nick reflected back on such experience in “The End of Something,” there’s a suggestion of his realization that as the soldiers dehumanized their opposite, they dehumanized themselves as a fish taking the bait of unstoppable sin-making: “When a trout, feeding on the bottom, took the bait it would run with it, taking line out of the reel in a rush and making the reel sing with the click on” (Hemingway, *In* 33).

For Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*, the soldiers that took the bait of dehumanization during the wars were more dangerous than a fish “making the reel sing with the click on,” or a hunter that play the “potted” trick. The war in this novel is rather depicted as a bullfight, in which the soldier took pride in killing the bulls, and entire nation took interest in seeing them kill. In his reflection on the dinner they watched the bulls unloaded before the fights, Jake said: “It was like certain dinners I remember from the war. There was much wine, an ignored tension, and a feeling of things coming that you could not prevent happening” (Hemingway, *The Sun* 117). Romero—the bullfighter—in his battle also found pleasure in killing as an opportunity of

showcasing his professions: “The bull was squared on all four feet to be killed, and Romero killed directly below us. He killed not as he had been forced to by the last bull but as he wanted to” (Hemingway, *The Sun* 175). Threading such descriptions into the context of the World Wars, Hemingway may have suggested that the observing audience in the homelands who advocated and honored the killings in the frontlines contributed as much in the dehumanizing act: “They’re not important ... After a while you never notice anything disgusting. ... Funny... How one doesn’t mind the blood” (Hemingway, *The Sun* 133-169).

Under the circumstances of being pushed to choose to fight or die, with the kindled fire of hatred from the homelands, the soldiers, like the bullfighter in Chapter XII of *In Our Time*, learned to see the battles as a part of their daily life: “[T]he bull charged and Villalta charged and just for a moment they became one. Villalta became one with the bull and then it was over” (Hemingway, *In* 105). As a result of becoming one with the war and the battlefield, the reliance on religion, kindness and morality is drawn out of their souls; for when the soldier in Chapter VII was in the middle of a bombardment, he made such a prayer: “oh jesus christ get me out of here. Dear jesus please get me out. ... I’ll tell every one in the world that you are the only one that matters” (Hemingway, *In* 67). The fact that “jesus christ” was not capitalized made it clear that the soldier’s prayer was only a frightened man’s imitation of sound, rather than addressing Jesus. Thus, “[t]he next night back at Mestre he did not tell the girl he went upstairs with at the Villa Rossa about Jesus. And he never told anybody” (Hemingway, *In* 67).

Spending years becoming one with the deserted frontiers, it is predictable that the young men who enrolled in the war would come back like children being born into a new world. However, many of them were born into disabled and discapable children. Nick Adams came

back with his spine severely damaged, and Jake Barnes with his thesaurus shot off, both mean that they were incapable of consummation. When a soldier comes back with a wound, it is common to imagine that a part of his faculties might have been amputated, but a wound that eliminates the man's ability to produce intercourse is absurd to think about. That, however, is the absurdity of the war that readers must be acknowledged of.

Not only that their faculties were not intact, their mentality was severely damaged: "I could shut my eyes without getting the wheeling sensation. But I could not sleep" (Hemingway, *The Sun* 118). Men like Nick Adams, Krebs Harold, or Jake Barnes were soldiers who were exposed to evilness, killings, who could not make a sincere prayer. Yet, when they returned home, their experience were kept silent. Explaining himself in the contribution to the frontiers, Jake always expressed a bitterness about his past and tried to avoid awakening his past, which was muted by alcohol: "We would probably have on and discussed the war and agreed that it was in reality a calamity for civilization, and perhaps would have been avoided" (Hemingway, *The Sun* 14). Instead, he just summed up the war in short words: "Everybody's sick. I'm sick, too" (Hemingway, *The Sun* 13). When the veterans like Krebs Harold in "Soldier's Home" were prepared enough to voice up about the war, the world had already moved on. After a "greeting of heroes" in which "[t]he men from the town who had been drafted had all been welcomed elaborately on their return," people forgot about 'the soldiers;' all men returned to being viewed as ordinary men whose responsibilities were to be "a credit to the community" by working and generating income (Hemingway, *In* 69-75). The war, consequently, became an outdated thrill: "Later he felt the need to talk but no one wanted to hear about it. His town had heard too many atrocity stories to be thrilled by actualities. Other than a hardship to share with the community,

Krebs also lost connections and mutual understandings with his own family. His favorite sister before the war had now lost all of the affections for him: “Well, Hare. ... You old sleepy-head. What do you ever get up for?” (Hemingway, *In* 73). His mother, believing that the effect of the war ended at the moment ‘cease-fire’ was declared on all battlefields, urged him to find a job and get on with life: “I know what [...] my own father told us about the Civil War and I have prayed for you. ... But you are going to have to settle down to work, Harold” (Hemingway, *In* 75).

For veterans with wounds like Nick and Jake’s, the war never came to an end, for it resulted in their loss of love and opportunity to be happy in love: “It was all gone. All he knew was that he had once had Marjorie and that he had lost her” (Hemingway, *In* 47). At the cost of their incapability of consummation, Nick Adams sent Marjorie away and Jake Barnes sent Brett Ashley to go with Romero the bullfighter: “The old grievance. Well, it was a rotten way to be wounded and flying on a joke front like the Italian” (Hemingway, *The Sun* 25). Humiliated by their lack of body parts, both Nick and Jake realized that the post-war life spared no opportunity for them to live fully as a human again. *The Sun Also Rise* is filled with tension moments where the two lovers had to fight against the longing to be together:

“Don’t touch me,” she said. “Please don’t touch me.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I can’t stand it.”

...

“Don’t you love me?”

“Love you? I simply turn all to jelly when you touch me” (Hemingway, *The Sun* 21)

Jake himself, though, understood very soon that “there’s not a damn thing we could do;” he dared not even think about his wound because it “is supposed to be funny” (Hemingway, *The Sun* 22). For Nick Adams, his relationship with Marjorie even became more torturing because of her attempt to sacrifice to be with Nick. In order to help Nick live on with the incident, Marjorie pretended that she did not know of the wound and never mentioned it:

“You know everything,” Nick said.

“Oh, Nick, please cut it out! Please, please don’t be that way!”

“I can’t help it,” Nick said. “You do. You know everything. That’s the trouble. You know you do” (Hemingway, *In* 34).

Nick and Marjorie had sailed through the war time together, but when he came back from the war with his new wound, he decided to send Marjorie to set out alone. Like Lady Ashley, Marjorie moved on with her life while Nick and Jake tried to find a way back to life: “I’m going to take the boat,” Marjorie called to him. “You can walk back around the point. (Hemingway, *In* 35). Being unable to provide Marjorie a happy family with a healthy husband and children, Nick once again had to walk to hell so that “she can marry somebody of her own sort and settle down and be happy” (Hemingway, *In* 47). In fact, having lost their lovers, Nick and Jake stepped even further away in their journeys back to life: “Ahead there was a bridge. Nick crossed it, his boots ringing hollow on the iron. ... Beyond the bridge were hills. It was high and dark on both sides of the track” (Hemingway, *In* 54). Given that the bridge was the only connection between life on the battlefields and normal life, the journey for Nick was the journey of darkness, cluelessness, and solitude.

An argument might be set up that Nick and Jake could have found their way back to life if they let Marjorie and Lady Ashley help. However, Hemingway proposed an even more profound problem: the world that these men came back to was very different from the world that the war promised to bring about. In fact, a Brett who lived lavishly in the Parisian community and a Brett whose last name is Ashley is Hemingway's allusion to F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'Valley of Ash' and, ultimately, T. S. Eliot's 'the waste land.' Walking out of the war, the only person that could still faithfully believe in religion was Krebs Harold's mother in "Soldier's Home." While the soldiers returning home from the wars could not believe in Christ, the modern society also leaned towards a decline of religion and a strong reliance on lust and bodily satisfactions: sex, alcohol, and lavish consumptions: "At the heart of these and similar American war novels by combatants [...] lies not the front experience as such, but the retreat from war and the attempt at individual reconciliation with a flawed society. And it is precisely this purportedly apolitical or transhistorical attempt at individual reconciliation that [...] restore[s] the specificity of the political content of everyday life and of individual fantasy-experience" (Piep 28).

In "Mr. and Mrs. Eliot," both of the characters appeared to be religious, and both insisted on pre-marriage chastity: "He wanted to keep himself pure so that he could bring to his wife the same purity of mind and body that he expected of her" (Hemingway, *In* 85). Yet, the 20th century that was changed by the war no longer tolerated such belief, "nearly all the girls lost interest in him" (Hemingway, *In* 85). Even when Mr. Eliot found his seemingly perfect match, Mrs. Eliot who also believed in purity, they could not have a happy ending. Because of their purity, "Mr. and Mrs. Eliot tried very hard to have a baby. They tried as often as Mrs. Eliot could stand it" (Hemingway, *In* 85). Yet, they did not succeed, and while Mr. Eliot ended up in a

nearly celibate status, Mrs. Eliot spent more time living and sleeping with her 'girlfriend' than conversing with her husband. The story "Cat in the Rain," besides acting as a dark joke about lust, provided an imaginary future if Lady Ashley and Jake Barnes, or Marjorie and Nick Adams were together in a marriage. While the American wife's conversation hinted a need for consummation, George, the husband seemed not to be able to fulfill her needs:

"Did you get the cat?" he asked, putting the book down.

"It was gone."

"Wonder where it went to," he said, resting his eyes from reading.

...

"I wanted it so much," she said. "I don't know why I wanted it so much. ... It isn't any fun to be a poor kitty out in the rain."

George was reading again. (Hemingway, *In* 93).

With a husband not being able to provide her feminine needs, the American wife had to seek for stereotypical femininity in materialistic ownings, which did not make her happy, eventually: "I want to pull my hair back tight and smooth and make a big knot at the back that I can feel, ... I want to have a kitty to sit on my lap and purr when I stroke her" (Hemingway, *In* 93). Not only that the marriage with George had drawn out the sense of femininity in her, the wife had begun to be attracted to the padrone: "She liked the deadly serious way he received any complaints," compared to her George who just read when she did so; "[s]he liked the way he wanted to serve her," compared to her George who paid too moderate attention to her feelings (Hemingway, *In* 92). The attraction to the padrone described by Hemingway had even hinted a sexual attraction by her reaction: "As the American girl passed the office, the padrone bowed from his desk.

Something felt very small and tight inside the girl” (Hemingway, *In* 93). The outcome of the two aforementioned marriages was celibate and isolation. Because of the lack of bodily satisfaction in the world of ‘the waste land,’ of Marjorie, and of Lady Ashley, it was impossible for these women to stay with their lovers, and for Nick Adams and Jake Barnes to marry their lovers: “Oh, Jake, ... we could have had such a damned good time together” (Hemingway, *The Sun* 198), Wolfgang E. H. Rudat in his article “Jake’s Wound and Hemingway’s War Trauma Once More: Allusions to Tristram Shandy and Other Jokes in *The Sun Also Rises*” sees that Hemingway in his portraits cried for an realization of the fact that the Great War had caused the society to be at stake in every aspects: “He presents “glorious” war as having achieved its ultimate victory over sex when the “honourable” weapons expurgated Jacob into Jake. ... As a result of the Great War, ... romantic love is in a diseased state: “this story is of sick love, a hypochondriac love, of lovers who enjoy poor health, poor love, sick love” (Rudat 196-200).

Finally, I chose the image of Bugs and Ad Francis in “The Battler” as the overarching situation that soldiers like Nick Adams and Jake Barnes was put into. As Ad Francis, with his problematic psychology, started to cause troubles, Bugs hit him from behind so that Ad fainted, and pretended that nothing had happened every time Ad woke up again:

Nick could not hear the words. Then he heard the little man say, “I got an awful headache, Bugs.”

“You’ll feel better, Mr. Francis,” the negro’s voice soothed. “Just you drink a cup of this hot coffee” (Hemingway, *In* 62).

Nick’s country pushed him to the frontiers to fulfill their greed for world power, and when he returned home with his mentality shaken and his faculties not intact, the society’s reaction to him

could be no better than “You’ll feel better, ... [j]ust you drink a cup of this hot coffee” (Hemingway, *In* 62). Because of such neglectance, one outcome that is haunting in “Out of Season” is that one soldier like Nick Adams, Krebs Harold, and Jake Barnes, with his incapability to return to normal, hung himself dead. Other survivors who did not suicide but could not return to normal became marginalized and humiliated, like the bullfighters that could not provide a satisfying show: “He sat down in the sand and puked and they held a cape over him while the crowd hollered and threw things down into the bull ring” (Hemingway, *In* 83). Philip Metres in his book *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront Since 1941* even cried for such death as examples of injustice: “While the lives and deaths of the great warriors hold our gaze, the masses of soldiers have all the personality of a bee swarm” (Metres 3).

Ultimately, through the characters and events happened in the two novels, *In Our Time* and *The Sun Also Rises* revealed another side of the tragedy brought by the war regimes, besides the death of millions of people. These young soldiers enrolled to go to the frontlines because of the vision that the war promised to bring — an ideal vision that the universe would fall into order, justice, and evolution. Instead, when they walked out of the war, not only that their physical and mental health were at stake, they were haunted by questions about their identity, their guilt, and their misled vision:

“All of a sudden everything was over,” Nick said. “I don’t know why it was. I couldn’t help it. Just like when the three-day blows come now and rip all the leaves off the trees.”

“Well, it’s over. That’s the point,” Bill said.

“It was my fault,” Nick said (Hemingway, *In* 47).

Enduring the post-war discontent, the veterans started to question their motive in engaging in the massive act of killing, which was summed up by Jake Barnes: “That was morality; the things that made you disgusted afterward. No, that must be immorality. That was a large statement” (Hemingway, *The Sun* 119).

Jake Barnes’ final realization, however, not only shed a light on the hope that he could come back to life, but also conveyed the message that Thoreau fought for in “Civil Disobedience.” In deciding a law to be just or unjust, one needs the guidance of his own morality. If it was an act of injustice, morality would be the punishment for it “made you feel disgusted afterward,” and for that it would be made clear that such act of injustice “must be immorality” (Hemingway, *The Sun* 119). Given so, the decision of justice and injustice lies not on the scale of the majority, but of the individual: “It is truly enough said that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience” (Thoreau). The reason why Hemingway’s two novels appeared to be two similar stories about almost the same person was because there happened to be a corporation of men without a conscience, who responded to the Selected Service Act, who did not utilize their conscience to evaluate the damage of standing in the militaries, shooting lives and damaging their own lives. The outcome of such a corporation was that they provided resources for a war regime to, without sacrificing their own security, earn power and benefits out of their own citizens. Mentioning the obedience of soldiers to the authority, Thoreau said:

The soldier is applauded who refuses to serve in an unjust war by those who do not refuse to sustain the unjust government which makes the war; is applauded by those whose own act and authority he disregards and sets at naught; as if the state were penitent to that degree that it

differed one to scourge it while it sinned, but not to that degree that it left off sinning for a moment (Thoreau).

In a reliance on the majority like such a war scheme, it may be mistaken that the consideration and resistance of a few individuals make no difference: “What is the price-current of an honest man and patriot today? They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect” (Thoreau). Yet, the consequence of hesitation and regrets is countless Nick Adams and Jake Barnes who spent a few years on the war fronts but many more years questioning their own abilities to live fully as a human being again after the war, because they were a part of the machine that created injustice. Martin Luther King Jr. in his letter even emphasized the expansion of negativity such a machine of injustice could create: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. ... Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly” (King). In resolution to that ties between the “anywhere” and the “everywhere,” between the “one” to the “all,” it is invalid to view any individual as voiceless or helpless: “It is not a man’s duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any ... wrong; ... it is his duty, at lease, to wash his hands of it, and ... not to give it practically his support” (Thoreau).

Under the enforcement of legislative support, injustice can, as a matter of fact, impose unjust punishments on disobedient citizens, but such disobedience is civil and such obedience serve the re-establishment of justice:

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a man is also a prison. ... If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that

would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood” (Thoreau).

In such case, protest literature like *In Our Time* and *The Sun Also Rises* created concrete evidence to the argument that each Nick Adams, each Krebs Harold, each Jake Barnes who joined the war, each person who act as an audience that celebrated war commitments, cast a vote for the State “to commit violence and shed innocent blood” (Thoreau). Compared to the price of giving up their chances to live fully humane, a place in prison as suggested by Thoreau was not the highest price they could have paid. Therefore, by seeing conscience of morality as the first and foremost agenda to decide just and unjust laws, a disobedience against a regime of injustice-making becomes civil, moral, and just: “But, if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn” (Thoreau).

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