

“The Iceberg Theory” in Ernest Hemingway’s Literary Creativity

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Annotation: Ernest Hemingway is one of the most famous American writers widely known for his unique style and writing techniques. Primarily, “The Iceberg Theory” is widely used by the author in his works. “The Iceberg Theory” is a new style in American literature at the beginning of XXth century. Thanks to Hemingway’s literary creativity that many writers learned how to use this style afterwards too. E.Hemingway suggested that a writer must not tell anything to the reader, he all the time must remain mysteriously. In this article we discussed and analysed his theory of omission which is used in his novels and stories.

Keywords: iceberg theory, writer’s style, writing technique, hidden meaning, surface, implicitly, complexity, symbolism

The iceberg theory or theory of omission is a writing technique coined by American writer Ernest Hemingway. As a young journalist, Hemingway had to focus his newspaper reports on immediate events, with very little context or interpretation. When he became a writer of short stories, he retained this newspaper style, focusing on surface elements without explicitly discussing underlying themes. Hemingway believed the deeper meaning of a story should not be evident on the surface, but should shine through implicitly¹.

Ernest Miller Hemingway (1899-1961) used the theory of omission or the iceberg theory in his literary creativity very broadly. He used this style in his novels and many stories as well. The reason why he used this style in his creativity a lot that Hemingway worked as a correspondent in early 1920s while living in Paris, he learned to write shortly and mysteriously. Later, when he started writing stories he claimed that fiction could be based on reality, but that if an experience were to be distilled, as he explained, then "what he made up was truer than what he remembered²".

Writers who utilize Hemingway’s iceberg theory must embrace the idea that they will always know more about the story, the world, and the characters than there will ever be room for on the page. For leaving things off the page can often be more powerful than spelling them out. Hemingway himself also claimed that if a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing³. Hemingway wrote about the theory of iceberg in his works several times, in 1923, Hemingway conceived of the idea of a new theory of writing after finishing his short story "Out of Season". In “*A Moveable Feast*”, his posthumously published memoirs about his years as a young writer in Paris, he explains: "I omitted the real end [of "Out of Season"] which was that the old man hanged himself. This was omitted on my new theory that you could omit anything... and the omitted part would strengthen

¹ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iceberg_theory

² Meyers, Jeffrey (1985). Hemingway: A Biography. London: Macmillan. ISBN 0-333-42126-4.p.23

³ Hemingway, E. “Death in the Afternoon”. Scribner’s, 1932, Chap. 16, 192.

the story⁴. In fact, at the beginning of the long piece of fiction, he always emphasizes on a great deal of outdoor scenes and does not introduce the protagonist directly. Such depiction of the scenery is poetic and picturesque and the writer's remarkable imagination, special writing style and marvelous artistic talent are shining between the lines of his works. Unavoidably, readers would feel pity for the writer spending so much writing on the scenery. Hemingway is different from him. He does not describe scene just for the scene, but expresses his emotions through the scene; the scene and emotions are not isolated, they are combined.

For example, in "The Old Man and The Sea", there is such a paragraph of scene description: "He could not see the green of the shore now but only the tops of the blue hills that showed white as though they were snow-capped and the clouds that looked like high snow mountains above them. The sea was very dark and the light made prisms in the water. The myriad flecks of the plankton were annulled now by the high sun and it was only the great deep prisms in the blue water that the old man saw now with his lines going straight down into the water that was a mile deep⁵". Hemingway's description of the sea is simple and clear. Snow white tops of the blue hills, snow white clouds, the dark sea and prism light, all these simple things consist of a beautiful picture of nature. However, the old man's On Hemingway's iceberg theory is not natural. The appearance of the line is just like the appearance of the leading role in a play. Hemingway, with succinct words, draws the readers' attention to the point directly. The beautiful scene is the background and the whole story happens in this background. And the lines which are going straight down into the water provide readers a great space for imagination.

Why are the lines straight down? What would happen with them? On the dimension of portraying the figure, Hemingway's art style is extraordinarily simple and direct. Among his works, "The old man and the sea" is most convincing of this point. According to Hemingway, this 30 thousand-word medium-length novel could be written as long as one thousand pages or more, including the introduction of catching fish at sea, the life and working of the people in the fishing village, the portrait of some secondary figures, etc. Nevertheless, Hemingway wrote in another way.

He omitted all those less important details; instead, he made this novel an allegory, which could be read and comprehended in many different ways, which was of immortal value. "The Old Man and The Sea" is the most successful practice of his iceberg theory. Hemingway also advocated that the character of the figure should be reflected through the image itself. The talks of the figure could reflect all the things while there is no need for the writer to talk too much about the figure. Only those incompetent writers, who do not believe in the readers' ability of comprehension, will have to explain everything by his words.

In "A Farewell to Arms", when Catherine was in the delivery room, her husband Henry worried a lot: "And what if she should die? She won't die... She won't die... She can't... She can't die why would she die? ...But what if she die?... She can't die... But what if she should die... What if she should die?⁶" The author uses very simple words to show that Henry was feeling upset and anxious, but also, he was longing for good news. In addition, Henry's psychology is shown apparently when he was busy running between the hospital and the tavern. In the half way, he came across a dog. "... a dog was nosing at one of the cans. What do you want? ' I asked and looked in the can to see if there was anything I could pull out for him. There was nothing on top but coffee-grounds, dust

⁴ Smith, Paul (1983). "Hemingway's Early Manuscripts: The Theory and Practice of Omission". *Journal of Modern Literature*. Indiana University Press. **10** (2): 268–288. *JSTOR* 3831126.

⁵ Hemingway, E. "The Old Man and The Sea". N.Y.Scribner's. 1952.

⁶ Hemingway, E. "A Farewell to Arms". N.Y.Scribner's. 1929, pp. 320-321

and some dead flowers... ‘there isn’t anything, dog. ’ I said...⁷” Hemingway strengthens the authenticity of the story by using the first-person speech. In this way, readers are connected tightly with the characters in the story. There is no doubt that terseness of writing is extraordinary, the beauty of symbolism is also a dazzling feature of Hemingway’s “iceberg theory”. No wonder some critics called him writer of symbolism.

The story “Hills Like White Elephants” describes a young man’s complex psychology before taking his girlfriend to the abortion operation. But the author does not mention any word about it; instead, he enables readers to detect it through the talk between the young man and her girlfriend. “White elephant” is used in the title of this story. In English, this phrase means heavy burden. Here, although the girl’s pregnancy signifies the love between the two, it may bring “heavy burden” to life in the future (especially the girl’s life).

Hemingway's biographer Carlos Baker believed that as a writer of short stories Hemingway learned "how to get the most from the least, how to prune language and avoid waste motion, how to multiply intensities, and how to tell nothing but the truth in a way that allowed for telling more than the truth."⁸ Baker also notes that the writing style of the "iceberg theory" suggests that a story's narrative and nuanced complexities, complete with symbolism, operate under the surface of the story itself.

From reading Rudyard Kipling Hemingway absorbed the practice of shortening prose as much as it could take. Of the concept of omission, Hemingway wrote in "The Art of the Short Story": "You could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood."⁹ By making invisible the structure of the story, he believed the author strengthened the piece of fiction and that the "quality of a piece could be judged by the quality of the material the author eliminated." His style added to the aesthetic: using "declarative sentences and direct representations of the visible world" with simple and plain language, Hemingway became "the most influential prose stylist in the twentieth century" according to biographer Meyers.

Also, in “A Farewell to Arms”, “arms” not only means “weapon”, but also means “hug”. It symbolizes that love is gone with the war. This is outstanding in “For Whom the Bell Tolls”. Below are the beginning and ending of this novel: “He lay flat on the brown, pine-needled floor of the forest, his chin on his folded arms, and high overhead the wind blew in the tops of the pine trees¹⁰”.

Or “He was waiting until the officer reached the sunlit place where the first trees of the pine forest joined the green slope of the meadow. He could feel his heart beating against the pine needle floor of the forest¹¹”. The number of words in the beginning and end is limited, but “pine trees” is mentioned several times. Undoubtedly, here “pine trees” has a connotative meaning: firstly, Jordan undertook an immoral task— blowing the bridge; secondly, he devoted himself to the war of justice. His contribution is lofty and solemn, which is just like the pine trees— eternal and everlasting.

⁷ Hemingway, E. “A Farewell to Arms”. N.Y. Scribner’s. 1929. p. 315

⁸ Baker, Carlos (1972). Hemingway: The Writer as Artist (4th ed.). Princeton University Press. ISBN 0-691-01305-5. p117

⁹ Meyers, Jeffrey (1985). Hemingway: A Biography. London: Macmillan. ISBN 0-333-42126-4. p. 114

¹⁰ Hemingway, E. “For Whom the Bell Tolls”. N.Y. Charles Scribner’s Sons. 1940. p.1

¹¹ Hemingway, E. “For Whom the Bell Tolls”. N.Y. Charles Scribner’s Sons. 1940. p.471

Baker calls Hemingway's *Across the River and into the Trees* a "lyric-poetical novel" in which each scene has an underlying truth presented via symbolism¹². According to Meyers an example of omission is that Renata, like other heroines in Hemingway's fiction, suffers a major "shock"—the murder of her father and the subsequent loss of her home—to which Hemingway alludes only briefly¹³. Hemingway's pared down narrative forces the reader to solve connections. As Stoltzfus remarks: "Hemingway walks the reader to the bridge that he must cross alone without the narrator's help."¹⁴

In "The Old Man and the Sea" Hemingway reflected the dignity of psychological winning over the physical fight. And the author described the old man still dreamed of lion even after his failure. Once Hemingway made such a wonderful argument, "The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water." So what is underneath the water? What is the 7/8? It seems that things are just like what Hemingway said: "I tried to make a real old man, a real boy, a real sea and a real fish and real sharks". But in fact, the images in "The Old Man and The Sea" are of sweeping generalization and have metaphoric meanings.

Marlin, sharks and lions are the symbols of the strong in nature; the sea is the symbol of the fatality; Santiago represents the "manhood" of human beings while his misfortune is a miniature of human's failure—all these can be well explained by Hemingway's sentence: "But if I made them good and true enough they would mean many things". In addition, from the standpoint of structure, *The old man and the sea* is extremely simple. First, there is alternation of dream and action (that is, Santiago's mental reminiscing or dialogues with the creatures of sea, set against the immediate demands for precise response to challenge).

Ernest Hemingway once said, "Great works all have some mysteries, but this kind of mystery cannot be separated. It continues to exist, with vitality forever; whenever you reread it, you'll get something new." The latter viewpoint focuses merely on its surface; actually that is where Hemingway's writing style lies in. English novel writer H. E. Bates once said: "Hemingway is the person with a broad-axe in hand. Before his appearance, there were several generations during which writing style became increasingly ostentatious, full of useless words. Fortunately, it's the time to say goodbye to those words. That is Hemingway's writing style: seemingly simple words are containing deep wisdom; the magnificent sight is similar to the motion of an iceberg in the sea—the dignity of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. The iceberg theory of Hemingway is not only a craft of simplification and abstraction, but also, courage to omit the expression of personal passion and the revelation of theme. This paper reveals the characteristics of stressing on the display of procedure of events, omitting the development of characters' feeling connections and hiding the theme of his works with analyzing Hemingway's short novels.

Conclusion. The contribution of Hemingway to the novel creation is shown in it. Iceberg theory not only makes Hemingway's writing rich in hidden thoughts, deep emotions, and more powerful and effective; but also shows the writer's belief of art and a lofty realm of art. Therefore, succinct words, deeply implied expression and symbolic technique perfectly epitomize Hemingway's iceberg theory. Hemingway shows us an eternal artistic world of his own unique style. Through his

¹² Baker, Carlos (1972). *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (4th ed.). Princeton University Press. ISBN 0-691-01305-5. p. 123-125

¹³ Meyers, Jeffrey (1985). *Hemingway: A Biography*. London: Macmillan. ISBN 0-333-42126-4. p. 445

¹⁴ Stoltzfus, Ben (2003). "The Stones of Venice, Time and Remembrance: Calculus and Proust in *Across the River and into the Trees*". *The Hemingway Review*. **22** (2): 20–29. doi:10.1353/hem.2003.0000. S2CID 162371637.

works, we can not only feel the charm of his words, but also understand the deep connotations of his works.

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