

An Investigation of Ernest Hemingway's Use of the Protagonist

How and to what effect does Ernest Hemingway develop the protagonist in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* into a round but static character, against the traditional dynamic protagonist that learns and grows?

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Introduction

At first glance, some readers may understand the novel simply as an anti-war novel without analyzing the key element that creates theme: Robert Jordan's role as an 'unusual' protagonist. Therefore, I developed a research question: **How and to what effect does Ernest Hemingway develop the protagonist in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* into a round but static character, against the traditional dynamic protagonist that learns and grows?** After thorough consideration of Robert Jordan's role in the novel as well as how the supporting characters affect the thematic development of the novel, I have determined that Ernest Hemingway primarily utilizes characterization to develop Robert Jordan into a complex, but unchanging character. Hemingway does this to draw the reader closer in to the plot itself. By making Robert Jordan into a protagonist with an identity, but without meaningful response to other characters or a development of self, he becomes more accessible to the reader. In essence, Robert Jordan's perspective brings readers into contact with theme from multiple sources, allowing Hemingway to expose the reader to a number of differing perspectives rather than limiting theme by originating exclusively from the protagonist. This technique of delivering theme is inherently more effective than the design of traditional protagonists for that very same reason: when the protagonist brings theme to light rather than creating it himself, more opportunities are created for the reader to learn a variety of important life realizations. Next, I will define the terms that will be consistently used to describe the style of protagonist that Ernest Hemingway used in this novel and show how the style differs from the standard formula for developing the purpose of the protagonist in literary works.

Nearly without fail, the traditional protagonists are heroic in nature, but usually contain at least one physical or mental flaw for the sake of creating a believable character for the reader. To

avoid oversimplification, protagonists can also have their flaw/s accentuated by the author with the intent of featuring a theme. Additionally, traditional protagonists are expected to be round and dynamic, creating a character that is easier for the readers to engage with. Moreover, they are frequently presented with a conflict that must be resolved. These characters are generally expected to solve said problem and may succeed or fail. Regardless of the result, the readers are intended to glean a particular theme from the protagonist's actions, often indicating how a reader should act, think, or feel when presented with a real-life situation. Thus, an identifiable theme emerges from the literary work that has varying impact upon the reader's attitudes. Additionally, in order to develop a round and static character, there are a few requirements that an author must meet. Firstly, to create a round character, an author must demonstrate through the use of multiple devices that the character has several facets. These devices include but are not limited to: direct or indirect characterization, dialogue, and juxtaposition. Secondly, to create a static character, an author must demonstrate through the character's interactions with other individuals that the character's attitudes and beliefs remain the same throughout the novel. Thus, it follows that the creation of a static character is less complex than the establishment of a round character since the author can simply limit dialogue between the given individual and others.

While Robert Jordan's role as the protagonist is clear – namely due to the fact that the plot follows Robert Jordan and never leaves his internal thoughts – Hemingway effectively managed to create the character in such a way that maintained his round and static personality. This development is curious, namely because the standard convention is to create a protagonist that adjusts to the social environment of the novel. While Jordan does develop to some extent through the development of the plot, he doesn't seem to change as much as a traditional protagonist might. From this perspective, it becomes clear that Jordan is simply a vehicle for the

delivery of theme created by other characters, rather than an active participant in the development of theme. After analyzing the novel, there were several significant aspects that I discovered, but the most interesting and original point of contention that I found was Robert Jordan's prominence being vastly different from any other protagonist that I have encountered. From all the research I have conducted, I will prove with a thorough examination that Ernest Hemingway develops Robert Jordan into a round and static character, against the ideas supporting a traditional protagonist with the intent of developing theme through a new perspective for the readers.

Investigation

The investigation portion of this essay provides the bulk of the material and is divided into two distinct 'sections'. The first section – The Characterization of Robert Jordan – thoroughly shows that a majority of Robert Jordan's attitudes remain the same by the end of the novel, the literary tools with which Hemingway accomplished the protagonist's static personality, and an analysis of a professional critique on the protagonist. The second section – The Role of Supporting Characters – thoroughly shows that other characters within *For Whom the Bell Tolls* are adapting their personalities to the changing conditions presented in the plot, juxtaposing Robert Jordan's stagnant personality.

The Characterization of Robert Jordan

When conducting a chronological analysis of Robert Jordan's attitudes, the reader can find a number of distinct situational reactions that contribute to his overall personality. This style of indirect characterization is frequently used throughout Hemingway's writing in this novel.

Thus, it will be the primary literary device discussed in this essay. It follows that this indirect characterization of Jordan is used almost immediately in the novel. The first chapter opens with a paragraph of imagery, followed by a discussion between two characters the reader comes to know as Anselmo and Robert Jordan. This analyzed portion marks the beginning of Robert Jordan's development as the protagonist, laying the foundation for my argument.

After Jordan spends some time speaking with Anselmo, Jordan engages in his first of many private monologues. Appearing on page four, Hemingway writes, "... [It was difficult] deciding whom to trust. You had to trust the people you worked with completely or not at all," (Hemingway 4). Besides providing advice from Jordan's perspective, Hemingway pivots slightly to express Jordan's sentiments on Anselmo, "Robert Jordan trusted [Anselmo], so far, in everything except judgement. He had not had an opportunity to test his judgement... No, he did not worry about Anselmo..." Finally, Hemingway expresses Jordan's attitude towards the blowing of the bridge, "... the problem of the bridge was no more difficult than many other problems. He knew how to blow any sort of bridge that you could name and he had blown them of all sizes and constructions." The first couple of quotes make the reader aware that Robert likes to have allies that are not only reliable, but also competent in judgement. Additionally, the second quote indirectly characterizes Robert as a person that sets high bars for developing trust between himself and another, suggesting that he values trustworthiness and therefore indirectly characterizes him thusly. What's more, the final quote listed above underscores that Robert has the utmost confidence in his ability to destroy the bridge. This inherent confidence in his abilities makes the reader believe that Jordan is competent at his job, indicating another use of indirect characterization by Hemingway. These first attitudes expressed by Robert Jordan already begin to carve out a personality that values several aforementioned qualities in others while also

being confident in his own capabilities. So far, Robert Jordan seems to be shaping into a protagonist, indistinct from any other on a broad scale. However, as Jordan encounters new situations throughout the literary work, purposefully created by Hemingway, he appears to remain the same when compared to his first appearance in the novel.

Later in the novel, Hemingway produces another internal monologue of Robert Jordan focused again on the problem of the bridge. Jordan's methodical way of tackling the problem of the bridge is revealed once more as he pictures the scene in his mind, again showing that he is a static character. After thoroughly describing the ideal picture of his plan, he briefly doubts himself, "He placed the charges... ran his wires, hooked them up... and then he started to think of all the things that could have happened and that might go wrong," (161). Just as Jordan is going to falter in the confidence established for his character, he quickly recovers, "Stop it, he told himself... It is one thing to think you must do and it is another thing to worry. Don't worry. You mustn't worry." Even when Hemingway shows a possible shift in attitude from Jordan, the moment swiftly passes and his established, static personality takes over once more. Furthermore, the protagonist's attitude about trusting other individuals either entirely or not at all is applied directly to his relationship with another character, Pablo. This man is introduced earlier in the novel, and almost as soon as Jordan meets him, Jordan distrusts him, thinking to himself, "He did not like the look of this man and inside himself he was not smiling at all," (9). Given this information, it follows that later, Jordan would go on to claim that Pablo is a "...bleary-eyed murderous sod... [and] I'd like to clink this cup against your teeth," (179) and that he would "...like to kill him and have it over with..." (212). These passages confirm Jordan's previously expressed sentiments, further supporting the assertion that he retains the same attitudes from the beginning of the novel throughout the rest of the novel.

As the novel ends, Robert Jordan continues to express the same sentiments, even when the chance of success for his mission decreases furthering the perception that he is a static character. Proceeding a terrible loss of Jordan's allies at the hands of the fascists, Jordan reaffirms to himself that he has a specific set of orders that he must carry out. He states, "The orders on this are very clear... But you must not worry nor must you be frightened," (335) confirming once more to the audience that Robert Jordan has not budged on this part of his personality, even in the face of deadly odds. On the very same page, Jordan goes on to note his pleasure with Anselmo's deeds, explaining, "And [Anselmo] running onto the on the hilltop alone... That impressed you, didn't it? Yes, that impressed you, Jordan." This particular quote demonstrates that despite all Robert Jordan has been through with Anselmo, he still appears to trust the man even when Anselmo takes the potentially mission-destroying action of investigating the scene of the hilltop without backup. Another relationship that Jordan maintains the same position is that of himself and Pablo. As noted multiple times before, Jordan despises Pablo due to what Jordan perceives as untrustworthiness and the tendency to be a scoundrel and this opinion does not change by the end of the novel. On the day of the mission's intended completion, Jordan fervently declares, "Oh, the dirty vile, treacherous sod. The dirty rotten crut... The smart, treacherous ugly bastard," (369) clearly showing that Jordan's opinion of Pablo has not changed in the slightest. These final passages demonstrate the continuity of thought that the protagonist maintains throughout the literary work, showing that Robert Jordan is a static character without the normal changes in opinion that is usually associated with a protagonist.

This peculiarity is only briefly acknowledged by critics, but it is unclear as to why an in-depth analysis of Robert Jordan's unusual role in the novel isn't discussed. According to a

summation of the critical response to Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* developed by Frank L. Ryan, critics "...were tremendously impressed by Pilar but gave relatively little attention to the major figurer, Robert Jordan," (Hollister 1-2). One such critic that overlooked the protagonist's importance is Carlos Baker, another analysis provided by the same compilation of critical responses. While Baker demonstrates an incredible breadth of knowledge of literature relevant to Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, he fails to fully describe the importance of the protagonist's strange role in the novel. Despite Carlos' impressive recognition of mysticism, the simultaneous perspective of life and death that is granted to the readers, and other complicated thematic ideas, he forgoes the opportunity to discuss Robert Jordan in detail. In spite of this lack of recognition by the critics, I will have to continue the analysis without the aid of any professional review, due to the fact that the topic has not been broached before. Thus, the analysis will recognize the necessity for a more compelling proof of my initial assertion and provide the second portion of my argument: the changing attitudes of supporting characters in the novel are not only juxtaposed against Robert Jordan's, but also serve as reinforcements to the quality of my thesis.

The Role of Supporting Characters

The supporting characters in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* play a much greater role in the development and communication of theme than Robert Jordan. They are often more complex than Jordan, forming the foundation for the novel's desired effect on the reader. In particular, Anselmo, Pablo, and Pilar provide much of this effect because they explore theme in a way that allows Robert Jordan to react, bringing the theme to light. In this sense, Jordan is acting as a vehicle for the transportation of theme, developed by other characters, providing readers with the ideas that Hemingway desires for them to explore. To demonstrate this point, the above-

mentioned supporting characters provided theme in varying degrees. Anselmo's comments on the nature of life provide meaningful, but brief glimpses into the themes of the novel, whereas Pablo and Pilar's comments had greater impact on the novel's message as a whole.

In Anselmo's case, the themes he developed were largely related to the war at hand and the killing of other human beings that his side refers to as "fascists". His perspective on this issue is clear; the "fascists" aren't actually "fascists". He articulates this idea to the readers multiple times throughout the novel, but the most detailed example is found near the middle of the novel as he laments about this topic, "It is only orders that come between us. Those men are not fascists. I call them so, but they are not. They are poor men as we are. They should never be fighting against us and I do not like to think of the killing," (Hemingway 192-193). This clearly developed thought indicates to the readers that Anselmo is not only a complicated individual, but also a good person. Hemingway makes this abundantly clear in the pages that follow, proclaiming, "Anselmo was a very good man and whenever he was alone for long, and he was alone much of the time, this problem of the killing returned to him," (196). The aforementioned passages characterize Anselmo as thoughtful and conflicted, which gives the reader a clear perspective to glean themes from. Unlike Jordan, Anselmo derives theme within himself. This quality shows once more that Jordan is reporting theme to the readers, rather than interpreting theme and providing a new perspective.

A similar situation can be derived from Pablo, who serves as a quasi-antagonist for the plot of the novel. As shown in Section One, Robert Jordan hardly considers himself an ally with Pablo, going as far as to demean his character. In this respect, Jordan remains constant with his view of Pablo. However, Pablo doesn't always reciprocate the obvious hatred that Jordan displayed. While it is worth noting that Pablo distrusted Jordan from the opening chapters of the

novel, and even in the middle of the novel where he sarcastically remarks, “I have thought you are a group of illusioned people,” Pablo said. “Led by a woman with her brains between her thighs and a foreigner who comes to destroy you,” (215). The passage gives a clear view of Pablo’s perspective: the group of rebels is dysfunctional. Despite his early qualms with the quality of the group, his attitude changes near the end of the novel. During a private conversation with Jordan, who Pablo refers to as *Ingles*, Pablo praises Jordan for his courage and reassures him that the band of rebels will succeed in their mission, “I have admired thy judgement much today, *Ingles*,” Pablo [said]. “I think thou hast much *picardia*. That thou art smarter than I am. I have confidence in thee,” (332-333). With Pablo’s direct compliments of Jordan, without any seeming hint of sarcasm to his tone, he seems to have changed his opinion of at least Jordan over the course of the novel’s events. It appears that even a character so directly opposed to the goals of the party changed his opinion over time, showing an obvious depth of character. Even though Pablo eventually sides with Jordan and the rest of the party, the analysis in The Characterization of Robert Jordan reveals that even after Pablo decides to support the party, Jordan still views Pablo in the same light as he did throughout the entirety of the novel. Again, Robert Jordan’s lack of flexibility shows that he is more of a passive participant than an active and driving force in the novel.

Lastly, the woman Pilar constantly appears as an individual that has an air of mysticism about her, providing a nearly endless possibility for analysis of her characterization. As noted by Carlos Baker, “[Pilar’s] function in part is to sharpen the reader’s foreboding and thus to deepen his sense of impending tragedy,” (Hollister 6). Not only does this analysis of Pilar paint her as a complex character, but also as a vital part to the tone of Hemingway’s novel. Without Pilar, there would be no sense of superstition or dread which would leave out a unique and essential part of

the novel. Baker explains, "Having watched Pablo's degeneration through fear, she is both too wise and too fond of Jordan to reveal that she has seen his coming death in the lines of his hand." This valuable exploration of Pilar's conflicted attitudes leaves the reader to believe that Pilar is a character complex enough to the point of realism in which she struggles with the burden of knowledge above others, a theme brought to new life with the lens of mysticism. In this way, Pilar arguably serves a role more important than Jordan since predicting the death of another character, particularly the protagonist, shows that she is able to foreshadow events ahead of the current plot. Thus, Jordan is once again shown as a character that follows the lead of the plot, rather than driving it forward in the way the Pilar does.

Conclusion

While there is a unignorable amount of evidence suggesting that Robert Jordan merely serves as a character that delivers theme to the reader rather than providing it, there is one important relationship in the novel that partially contradicts my argument. Robert Jordan's romantic relationship stands in mild contrast to my claims that all of his attitudes remain completely constant. In a conversation with his general, Jordan explicitly states, "...there is no time for girls," (Hemingway 7) showing that he has no interest in women during the wartime. However, Jordan later goes on to fall completely in love with a woman within the span of three days. By page 159, Jordan has already broken his convictions by having sex with Maria after only knowing her for a day. This relationship persists throughout the rest of the novel, and even elevates itself to the point of Jordan planning a future for himself and the woman in Madrid. This critical relationship in the novel may stand in contradiction to my thesis, but it serves as only a single point against my assertion. However, this contention is not particularly strong, largely due to the fact that this change in Jordan's attitude was entirely orchestrated by Pilar. Throughout the

novel, Pilar not only predicts, but also encourages the relationship between Robert Jordan and Maria. A supporting character was the driving force behind the relationship, not necessarily Jordan himself. It is unclear how the relationship would have developed if Pilar hadn't been an influence upon Jordan. Thus, while this limitation of my thesis does exist, the strength of its counterclaim is not sufficient to warrant a reconsideration of my premises.

After a deep analysis of the protagonist, Hemingway's purpose with creating such an odd character becomes clear: develop a character that is the center of all events and serves as a constant observer and catalyst to theme established by others. Additionally, while this protagonist has a conflict and resolves it, this conflict is actually secondary – merely a backdrop – to the primary themes expressed in the novel. This style of writing is incredibly unique in my experience, creating a novel with intriguing elements that are not only designed to provide theme, but also to conceive of a new way to provide those themes. In this way, Hemingway has created an entirely new way to derive meaning from a work of fiction. With the protagonist as a mere participant in the plot rather than an essential character for the development of theme, an author can spread theme across multiple supporting characters, allowing readers to derive meaning from several unique angles, rather than receiving theme through the same perspective each time. This innovative way of sharing theme with readers is not only a new method of using a protagonist, it is also an effective one. With this method, readers can identify supporting characters and pick out individual themes unique to each character, rather than having to laboriously pick apart the protagonist as a source of all universal truth. In that regard, Ernest Hemingway has produced a novel that is rich with meaning, proving that a protagonist can be utilized in a new way that successfully communicates theme with even greater effectiveness than traditional methods. Thus, he has left a lasting mark on literature with *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

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