Study material on "The Snows of Killimanjaro" by Ernest Hemingway

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The main character in this short story is a writer named Harry, who, with his wife, Helen, is on a hunting safari in East Africa when he fails to disinfect properly a scratch on his leg and dies from the gangrene that sets in.

While they are waiting for a plane from Nairobi, Kenya, that will fly Harry out to a hospital, he spends his time—most of one day and that night—either verbally abusing Helen or thinking about some experiences he has had that he has saved to write about but that he now knows he will never complete. As he says to Helen, "We quarrel and that makes the time pass." But he is the one doing all the quarrelling. Helen tries to make him as comfortable as possible, offering to read to him and supervising the food and drink prepared for him by the African "boys" on the safari with them.

They had gone to Africa, "where he had been happiest in the good time of his life" in order to "work the fat off his soul." But as he acknowledges, he "had destroyed his talent by not using it . . . by drinking so much that he blunted the edge of his perceptions" and by a "catalogue" of other things that always interfere with a writer's work.

The experiences he has saved to write about are presented in the form of five FLASHBACKS, memories of better times in Harry's life. The first flashback begins in the railway station in Karagatch in 1922, where he is waiting for the Simplon-Orient Express to take him out of Thrace following the retreat of the Greeks during the GRECO-TURKISH WAR. He also remembers times in western Austria, where he and his first wife rented houses during the winter; and he remembers a WORLD WAR I pilot who had bombed an Austrian officers' leave train and bragged about machinegunning the officers as they ran from the train. Each of the experiences he remembers are ones he thought would make good stories, but now he knows he will never get the chance to write about them.

The second flashback begins in Constantinople (the name was changed to Istanbul in 1930, which helps to place the time of the story in the mid to late 1920s). He remembers the city well, because he "whored the whole time," trying to forget that his first wife, whom he still loves, had left him. He also remembers that when he got back to Paris he saw an American poet with a "pile of saucers in front of him . . . talking about the Dada movement with a Romanian who said his name was Tristan Tzara." And he remembers that a letter had come to his apartment from his first wife, and that his new wife asked, "Who is the letter from, dear?" As Harry remembers it, "that was the end of the beginning of that," implying the probable breakup of his second marriage as well.

The third flashback begins with the log house his grandfather owned, which burned to the ground

and destroyed all of his grandfather's guns. And he remembers that after the war (World War I) "we" (he and his first wife) rented a trout stream in the Black Forest (in southwest Germany) and that the proprietor of the hotel in Triberg, a little town on the Brigach River, had a fine season. And he remembers the place Contrescarpe in Paris and the whores at the BAL MUSETTE, which he and his first wife lived above just after the war. And he

remembers Marie, a neighbour, protesting the French government's shortening the work day to eight hours, saying, "If a husband works until six he gets only a little drunk on the way home and does not waste too much. If he works only until five he is drunk every night and one has no money. It is the wife of the working man who suffers from this shortening of hours."

The short fourth flashback begins with Harry thinking that he had never written about Paris: "Not the Paris that he cared about." The fifth flashback begins with a bombing officer named Williamson whom Harry had known in the war. He had been hit by a "stick bomb" as he was coming through some wire and, screaming, he "had begged every one to kill him." Harry remembers that earlier he and Williamson had argue about "our Lord never sending you anything you could not bear and some one's theory had been that . . . at a certain time the pain passed you out automatically." But Harry remembers how much suffering Williamson had been through, without passing out. This memory corresponds to his statement to Helen in the story's opening sentence: "The marvellous thing is that it's painless" (the gangrene). Throughout "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," impending death is represented for Harry by various things that pass across his mind: a puff of wind, the wheels of a bicycle, birds circling, or a hyena making a noise. He feels death "come by" more and more until, finally, it sits on the edge of his bed and then on his chest. And then the weight lifts from his chest and disappears.

The narrator describes a dream that Harry had just before he died, a dream in which his pilot friend Compton arrives in the morning, and there is room for only one passenger on the plane. It takes off, but instead of going toward Arusha, where Compton had said they would refuel, the plane turns "left," and "Compie turned his head and grinned and pointed and there, ahead, all he could see, as wide as all the world, great, high, and unbelievably white in the sun, was the square top of Kilimanjaro. And then he knew that there was where he was going."

At the end of the story, Helen is also dreaming— of her house on Long Island in an earlier marriage— but the noise the hyena makes wakes her, and she sees that Harry has died. There is an epigraph to the story, which explains that the "western summit is called the Masai 'Ngàje Ngài,' the House of God. Close to the western summit there is the dried and frozen carcass of a leopard. No one has explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude." Harry had wasted his talent and so was not able to fulfill his "dream." "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" was first published in ESQUIRE (August 1936) and reprinted in The Fifth Column and the First Forty-nine Stories (1938).

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

A great deal of the criticism written about "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" during the past 70 years has attempted to interpret the story's epigraph. The mountaintop suggests an ideal that the leopard had reached, however inexplicably, but that Harry apparently has not. Should Harry be given credit for believing that he is at least on his way to the top of Mt. KILIMANJARO when he dies? Is it enough merely to wish for an ideal? Or is it work alone that counts? How important is it to remember that Kilimanjaro is the "House of God" for the

people who live close to the mountain, the MASAI? Does Harry give the mountain a similar religious or at least spiritual value?

A number of critics have interpreted some of the story's details metaphorically. It has been suggested, for example, that the leopard represents life and the hyena death. This reading provides the story with a happy ending, since Harry achieves, at least in his pre-death dream, the mountaintop where the leopard lies. And the hyena, providing terrifying background noise throughout the story, is left behind.

CARLOS BAKER's chapter "The Mountain and the Plain" in his book Hemingway: The Writer as Artist (1952) does not mention "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," but in discussing the symbolic significance of the mountain and plain in A Farewell to Arms, he could be writing about the short story. The plain, with which Hemingway begins A Farewell to Arms, represents for Baker death in war: "Down this plain the river flows. Across it, on the dusty road among the trees, pass the men-at-war, faceless and voiceless and unidentified against the background of the spreading plain." The mountain, on the other hand, "produces" for Baker "a sense of clearness, dryness, whiteness, and sunniness. . . ." The Masai Steppe which becomes the northern Tanzania foothills of Mt. Kilimanjaro on its border with Kenya, is the plain of the short story and may be contrasted with the mountain, where life is fulfilled. The plain is a sort of numbness where death awaits unfulfilled dreams, represented by its dryness and where animals struggle to survive, not the least of which is the hyena. The snows of Kilimanjaro are life-giving; the plains are death-giving. Harry's italicized flashbacks mix love and death in what seems to be an inescapable pairing for a man who has just divorced a wife he still loves in order to marry a woman who loves him and provides financial support. He doesn't blame her for his distruction: "He had destroyed his talent himself. . . . He had destroyed his talent by not using it, by betrayals of himself and what he believed in, by drinking so much that he blunted the edge of his perceptions. . . ."

All these are characteristics of what some critics have referred to as a death-wish. War is the other subject of the flashbacks, in particular, World War I and the Greco-Turkish War. Both wars were destructive of people and places, yet also provided Harry with experiences that he still feels would make good stories—if he hadn't wasted his talent.

CHARACTERS AND RELATED ENTRIES

Anatolia , the name in ancient geography for all land east of the Aegean Sea; it's the modern name for Asia Minor. When Harry in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" uses the word he means Asiatic Turkey. bicycles In describing the death that Harry feels coming, in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," the narrator uses the image of bicycles as one way of representing death. Harry "lay still and death was not there. It must have gone around another street. It went in pairs, on bicycles, and moved absolutely silently on the pavements."

Boys, In "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," Harry dreams that "the boys," the gun-bearers and trackers, light the kerosene fires in order to guide a plane in to the campsite.

Carbolic solution In "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," Harry, the main character, dies from a scratch on his leg which he fails to protect properly. He forgets to put iodine on it, because he "never" infects, and then, when it gets worse, he uses a "weak carbolic solution when the

other antiseptics ran out," and the solution "paralyzed the minute blood vessels and started the gangrene."

Compton In "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," he is the pilot of a plane that Harry dreams about, which will arrive at the safari campsite to take him to a hospital in Nairobi, Kenya.

Harry Main character in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," a writer. He and his wife, Helen, are on a safari in East Africa, a trip that has turned bad because Harry develops gangrene after failing to treat a scratch on his right leg. He spends his time lying on the cot Helen has set up for him outside their tent and either abusing her verbally or wandering off into memory flashbacks about stories he had saved to write about but which he knows now he will never write.

Helen Harry's wealthy wife in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." She tries to comfort Harry as well as she can, but he is dying from gangrene in his right leg, received from a scratch he didn't takecare of properly. They are waiting for a plane that will take him to a hospital in Kenya, but Harry knows he is dying and takes his anger out on Helen by abusing her verbally. She is sensitive to his condition but unhappy with Harry's constant anger, seeming to blame her for his impending death.

Julian In "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," Harry remembers "poor Julian and his romantic awe" of rich people. Julian once wrote a story that began, "The very rich are different from you and me. And how some one had said to Julian, Yes, they have more money. But that was not humorous to Julian." This is a not very veiled allusion to F. SCOTT FITZGERALD's short story, "The Rich Boy," published in 1926. And the name was not "Julian" but "Scott" in the first version of "Snows," published in ESQUIRE (August 1936).

Leopard, the There is a mystery concerning a leopard in the epigraph to "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." Hemingway writes that close to the western summit of Mount Kilimanjaro, called the "House of God" in the Masai language, "there is the dried and frozen carcass of a leopard. No one has explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude."

Molo One of the African native "boys," in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," working for Harry and Helen on their hunting trip in Tanzania. Molo changes the dressings on Harry's leg and brings him whiskey-sodas.

M.P.'s Military Police, probably British, remembered by Harry in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." He remembers a fight he had had with a British gunner subaltern and that the M.P.'s had broken it up. Ngàje Ngài Masai language for "House of God," used in the epigraph to "The Snows of Kilimanjaro."

Pavillion Henri-Quatre A hotel in Paris, in Saint Germain, where Harry, in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," remembers staying with his wife, Helen.

Plane Harry and Helen, in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" are waiting for a plane they've called in from Nairobi to take Harry back to a hospital for treatment of gangrene in his right leg. At the end of the short story, Harry dreams that the plane arrives, that "the [native] boys" have lit the fires to guide "old Compton" (the pilot) in to the camp, and that instead of flying toward Nairobi when Compton takes off again, he heads the plane toward the top of Kilimanjaro.

Spur Popular magazine of the 1920s, which, according to Harry in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," published pictures of his wife, Helen. See also Town and Country.

Swift and Armour In one of Harry's self-deprecating and selfish outbursts at Helen in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," he plays on the name of the American meatpacking firm by saying to her, "Your damned money was my armour. My Swift and my Armour." "Amour" is the French word for "love" or "passion."

Town and Country (1846–present) Popular magazine of the 1920s, which, according to Harry in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," published photographs of his wife, Helen. He thinks of her now, as he looks at her, as "only a little the worse for drink, only a little the worse for bed." Town and Country was founded in 1846 and has the distinction of being America's oldest continuously published general-interest magazine.

Tristan Tzara (1896–1963) Romanian-born French poet and essayist, founder of the Dada movement, a nihilistic revolution in the arts intended to devalue everything in modern civilization; he is remembered by Harry in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro."

Death In "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," Harry feels death approaching his cot while he waits, with a gangrenous right leg, to be taken by plane out to Nairobi and a hospital. Near the end, Harry feels that "death had come and rested its head on the foot of the cot and he could smell its breath." In a twist at the end of the story, Hemingway depicts two deaths: the first is only in Harry's state of delirium as he envisions the plane coming, the pilot taking off but instead of heading for Arusha, where he had said he would refuel, he turns the plane toward the top of MOUNT KILIMANJARO. The second death takes place in reality, as the story's point of view shifts to Helen and she hears the hyena "whimpering in the night" and making the "strange" sound, which she hears but does not wake to. It is only when she does wake, after some dreaming of her own, that she looks over at Harry's cot and realizes that he is dead.

The rich wife in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (1936), whose money, her dying husband claims, has been a bad influence on his work, were categorized simply as "rich bitches" by early critics, but more recently scholars have seen these women as finely drawn figures, frustrated and limited by their social roles and one-dimensional relationship to the men in their lives. Though the figure of the rich wife might have been inspired by Pauline, the fact is that Pauline did provide a comfortable environment in which Hemingway produced much of his best work.

Character list

Harry Once a promising writer, he sacrificed his talent for the comfort of his wife's money. Now, dying of gangrene, he realizes that he will never be able to write the great fiction that he had envisioned. He is painfully conscious of his defeat and loss.

Helen Harry's wife; he married her because he thought he loved her; in truth, however, he married her because of her money. Helen is a loyal, loving, affectionate, and courageous woman.

Molo The servant who tends to Harry; his main function is to pour enough liquor in Harry so that Harry can stand the pain of his wound and that of utter disappointment.

Compson The aviator who is supposed to arrive and take Harry to a hospital.

Ernest Hemmingway

Hemingway broke new literary ground when he began publishing his short stories. Furthermore, not only was he an American writer, but he was not an ivory-tower esthete; he was a man's man. He hunted in grand style, deep-sea fished, covered both World War I and World War II for national news services, and was married as many times as Hollywood celebrities — and yet he found time to write novels and stories that feature men and women facing both death and emotional crises with grit, gumption, and grand tenacity.

Hemingway's heroes are characterized by their unflinching integrity. They do not compromise. They are vulnerable but are not defined by their vulnerability. Hemingway's men and women are often defiant of what society expects of them: They eat with gusto, devour adventure, and have sex — simply and directly.

Ernest Hemingway's literary career was shaped by the remarkable contexts in which he lived, from the streets of suburban Chicago to the shores of the Caribbean islands, to the battlefields of World War I, Franco's Spain, and World War II .

Published the short story in Esquire magazine in 1936. Hemingway's 1936 short stories "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" both hinge on an understanding of the highly gendered sport hunting tradition, questioning the assumed causal link between virile masculinity and blood sports.

Among the insights Ernest Hemingway's writing offers into his relationship to Africa and Africans, two stand high in distinction. First, his initial safari to Kenya and Tanzania (formerly Tanganyika) in 1933–4 cultivated the "idea of Africa,"1 which, Hemingway scholars agree, inspired some of his most celebrated work, including "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (1936), "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" (1936), and his second work of nonfiction, Green Hills of Africa (1935). Second, his next safari in 1953–4, which covered parts of Uganda, the Congo, Tanzania, and Kenya, engendered a desire to reconcile his "idea of Africa" with the reality of large-scale changes taking place throughout the continent.

Interior dialogue that opens the posthumously published fictional memoir Under Kilimanjaro (2005) provides a lens through which to understand the evolution in Hemingway's thoughts about the continent and its natives between these two sojourns.

Though plain, the short story's language is embedded with an arduous and compelling imagery loaded with symbolic meaning. In fact, from the very beginning to the end we are witnesses to an impressive amount of expressionistic elements; for instance, passages which look like flashbacks but are dreamy visions.

First, I consider crucial the fact that there are several similarities found in the text between Hemingway's personal and real life and the short story's plot. The short story starts in medias res with Harry and Helen, a couple visiting Africa; during the safari, Harry scratches himself with a car which causes him gangrene. Suffering and slowly dying, Harry awaits for his death which he does not try escaping. His sentimental partner, Helen, tries to help him

during this difficult time, but Harry aggravates the circumstances insulting her. The ending is tragic; when the rescue-plane is almost arriving, Harry dies. Despite the death of the character, our writer's story is somehow connected with his creation. He first visited the African continent in 1933 with his second wife Pauline; they visited the Eastern part; Kenya, Nairobi, etc. The next and last time he returned to Africa was in 1952 with his fourth and last wife. They almost died twice in two different plane crashes.

Moreover, it's not only the fact of visiting Africa which creates boundaries between the literary and the real, but other details, such as Harry and Helen's relationship. According to Vogelmann (2004), Ernest Hemingway did felt the same as Harry feels with his relationship with Helen;

"Hemingway might have had some reservations about living on his wife's money and his pride could have been hurt by the feeling of being bought" (web). In other words, there is identification between the author and the character's feeelings. Taking this into account, we consider the concept of "autobiografiction" coined by the British writer Stephen Reynolds in 1906 which he defined as "fiction with a good deal of the writer's own life on it, or for those lapses form fact which occur in most autobiographies" (web). In fact, other critics such as Kinnamon indicate that the coincidences are not subtle, but accurate and obvious:

"all readers (…) who are familiar with Hemingway biography immediately recognize, most of Harry's italicized recollections correspond to actual events in the author's life: riding the Orient Express on his way back to Oaris in October 1922, skiing in western Austria in 1924-25 and 1925-26, whoring in Constantinople, observing the Greco-Turkish conflict, picking blueberries in northern Michigan, living in the Place Contrescarpe in Paris, holding a horse's tail to descend a mountain at night in the American West, hearing war stories from the Western Front. And, of course, Harry's immobilized condition on the Serengeti Plain and his dream-vision of escape by air to the purity of the heights of Kilimanjaro correspond roughly to Hemingway's attack of amoebic dysentery with severe diarrhea requiring air transportation from the bush back to Nairobi on January 16, 1934." (Kinnamon 18).