

Hemingway & Silence

by Robert S. Boone



Photo: Helen Breaker, Paris

As a writer, how can you reveal the feelings of the characters in your short stories? How can you make your readers understand that a certain character in a certain story feels happy, confused, or wretched? You can, of course, simply have your character say, "I feel wretched." Or you can have one of your other characters in the story explain in direct dialogue, "Look, this fellow feels wretched." As the creator of the story, you can even step in yourself to tell your readers that your character feels wretched.

But these techniques are not always satisfactory, are they? Short stories are a form of entertainment. Like most kinds of entertainment, it's more fun when you're *involved*. Readers of fiction want to *discover* feelings for themselves; they do not want to be told directly.

In the "Focus" article in last month's issue, Laurie Levy said that an author should "show" characters, not "tell" about them. An author does this by describing a character's mannerisms, speech patterns, clothing, bodily movements, and any other subjects giving a clue to personality.

And—especially when it comes to describing feelings—an author can describe a character's silence. Think about it: a writer can make characters talk or make them stay quiet. Few techniques can be more chillingly effective in expressing feelings than this selective use of silence. And few authors employ this technique with more force than does Ernest Hemingway.

Grief

In "The End of Something," Nick Adams, the hero, breaks up with his girl friend. The story begins with the two paddling to a remote piece of land to fish. Instead of talking about the beautiful weather or about all the fish they will catch, Nick paddles along sullenly. At the fishing spot, he offers only a few one-syllable grunts as he and his girl prepare the rods. Fishing is a ritual Nick once cherished; on this day, he acts bored. Finally, sitting beside his girl on a blanket as the two gaze out at the moon, he speaks about their relationship: "It isn't fun anymore." They talk only briefly

after that, and then she leaves alone in the canoe.

At that moment, Nick's buddy Bill, who has been hiding in the bushes, suddenly appears.

"Did she go all right," Bill said.

"Oh, yes," Nick said, lying, his face on the blanket.

"Have a scene?"

"No, there wasn't any scene."

"How do you feel?"

Bill doesn't know—but we do—that Nick feels terrible. Nick had no idea how much pain this separation would produce. Hemingway has told us this primarily through Nick's silence. Nick could open his mouth and say, "Bill, I feel lousy. I thought breaking up with Marjorie would be easy, but I had no idea how much hurt would accompany it." Instead, here's how Hemingway ends his story:

"How do you feel?"

"Oh, go away, Bill! Go away for a while." Bill selected a sandwich from the lunch basket and walked to have a look at the rods.

Consider this: to show us how little Bill understands the situation, Hemingway has him grab a sandwich.

At the end of *A Farewell to Arms*, perhaps his greatest novel, Hemingway must show the tremendous grief the hero, Frederick Henry, feels after his lover, Catherine, dies in a hospital in Switzerland. Hemingway could have his first-person narrator tell us how he feels at that moment, but he doesn't, of course.

Instead, he shows Henry talking to the doctor in the hallway of the hospital after Catherine has died.

"Can I take you to the hotel?"
[The doctor asks]

"No, thank you. I am going to stay here for a while."

"I know there is nothing to say. I cannot tell you . . ."

"No," I said, "There's nothing to say."

The doctor leaves, and Henry returns to the hospital room to take one last look at Catherine.

"You can't come in now," one of the nurses said.

"Yes I can," I said.

"You can't come in yet."

"You get out," I said. "The other one too."

But after I got them out and shut the door and turned off the light it wasn't any good. It was like saying good-bye to a statue. After a while I went and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain.

Hemingway does not use a single word to describe Henry's total grief; yet only the most insensitive reader would miss the point.

Anger

In "Indian Camp," a younger Nick Adams watches the birth of an Indian baby. Along with Nick are his father, who delivers the child, the doctor's brother George,

and the mother's husband, who is lying in the upper bunk of a bed.

Through suggestion, Hemingway lets the reader know that George, apparently a failure, views his brother's success with contempt. After the operation, Hemingway has one more chance to show this feeling.

He [the doctor] was feeling exhalted and talkative as football players are in the dressing room after a game.

"That's one for the medical book, George," he said. "Doing a Caesarian with a jack-knife and sewing it up with nine-foot gut leaders."

Uncle George was standing against the wall, looking at his arm.

"Oh, you're a great man all right," he said.

Of course, George means just the opposite. All his life, he probably has witnessed his brother's great triumphs and the gloating that followed them. But now, instead of saying what he really thinks, he only mutters a sarcasm.

Awe

Later in the same story, Hemingway must show Nick's strong feeling. Right after the exchange with his brother, Nick's dad goes to check the Indian father in his upper bunk. But instead of finding a proud daddy, he finds a dead man. The Indian, unable to endure the screams of his wife, has slit his throat with a hunting knife.

Young Nick, who only moments before experienced birth, must now face death. Hemingway shows Nick's reactions through a conversation with his father and then through his silence. The two talk as they row home:

"Do ladies always have such a hard time having babies?" Nick asked.

"No, that was very exceptional."

"Why did he kill himself, Daddy?"

"I don't know, Nick. He couldn't stand things, I guess."

"Do many men kill themselves, Daddy?"

"Not very many, Nick."

"Do many women?"

"Hardly ever."

"Don't they ever?"

"Oh, yes. They do sometimes."

"Daddy?"

"Yes."

"Where did Uncle George go?"

"He'll turn up all right."

"Is dying hard, Daddy?"

"No, I think it's pretty easy, Nick. It all depends."

Hemingway's characters speak with restraint.

The short stories and novels of Hemingway provide countless other examples of characterization through silence. "Hills Like White Elephant," "The Killers," "The Light of the World," and "The Battler" offer superior examples, but any one of Hemingway's stories show this great skill at work. !

Write Now . . .

● The author shows how Hemingway, master of economical use of language, speaks sparingly, but carries a big emotional wallop. Choose one of the emotions described in the article: grief, anger, or awe. Write a *soliloquy*—talking to yourself to reveal the emotion.