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Ernest Hemingway's Subconscious Practice of the "Theory of Omission" in "Up in Michigan"

After studying many of Ernest Hemingway's short stories, I believe that "Up in Michigan" is one of the most controversial. I base this upon the considerable amount of literary criticism that has been formed by scholars regarding its textual interpretation and Hemingway's authorial intent. As Paul Smith writes, "Up in Michigan" is most often "read as the tale of, at best, a seduction and, at worst, a rape" (*A Reader's Guide* 7). Arguments of its ambiguity and morality began with Gertrude Stein, Hemingway's close friend and mentor. After reading "Up in Michigan," Stein claimed the story "was inaccrochable, unsuitable for public display" (*A Reader's Guide* 3). On the other hand, "Hemingway knew the story was significant" (Lupton 1).

First published in 1923 in *Three Stories and Ten Poems*, "Up in Michigan" is "one of the earliest stories Hemingway wrote" (*A Reader's Guide* 3). For this reason, scholars often begin with this story when examining the development of Hemingway's narrative style and technique. The underlying issues are a prelude to Hemingway's later stories, as they explore the complexities of relationships and separate masculinity from femininity. Furthermore, the story is unique in that it captivates readers from any historical or cultural context; it "becomes richer as time passes and critical inquiry reveals more of Hemingway's genius in understanding human nature" (Lupton 1).

In "Hemingway's Early Manuscripts: The Theory and Practice of Omission," Paul Smith discusses one of Hemingway's literary characteristics, the theory of omission. He explains that the theory of omission is often "construed to describe a single and distinct creative act" ("Hemingway's Early Manuscripts" 270) and that it is "invoked to account for a variety of 'things left out'" ("Hemingway's Early Manuscripts" 271). Moreover, he determines that it "began almost as an afterthought in [a] letter to Fitzgerald [in] 1925" ("Hemingway's Early Manuscripts" 277).

While crafting a story, Hemingway used the theory of omission to "leave out essential information of the story under the belief that omission can sometimes add strength to a narrative" (*Hemingway Resource Center*). Additionally, he presumed that by removing certain elements in a story, readers would be able to "feel or experience not just as much but 'more than they understood'"¹ ("Hemingway's Early Manuscripts" 276).

¹Beginning with 'more than...' originally appeared in *A Moveable Feast* (Scribner's, 1964), p. 211—quoted by Paul Smith.

Smith speculates that “the manuscripts of the early stories . . . suggest that elements of the original conception of a story were ordinarily omitted or deleted at two stages [invention and revision] in a complex process of writing” (“Hemingway’s Early Manuscripts” 271). However, he eliminates the possibility that “Up in Michigan” was crafted by the theory of omission because of “stylistic and structural revisions [that] are indecisive [and] inconsistent” (“Hemingway’s Early Manuscripts” 287) within the typescripts. Furthermore, he claims “none of the manuscripts of the stories in the two years following ‘Big Two-Hearted River’ show [as] much indecision . . . [the revisions] are informed and directed by what seems to have become an almost instinctive sense of style and structure” (“Hemingway’s Early Manuscripts” 288).

Although Smith justifies these conclusions accordingly, I would like to contest his argument and propose that “Up in Michigan” was, in fact, the first time Hemingway used the theory of omission. However, I believe that Hemingway did so subconsciously, and I attribute the typescripts’ “stylistic and structural revisions [that] are indecisive [and] inconsistent” (“Hemingway’s Early Manuscripts” 287) to this; during the writing of “Up in Michigan,” Hemingway was just beginning to learn and understand the craft which made him the renowned author he is. The theory of omission did not evolve until Hemingway began “Out of Season,” written sometime in the spring of 1923, wherein he realized and defined the theory’s complexity. By comparing the pre-publication typescripts of “Up in Michigan” with the published version, one will find there are specific instances that allude to Hemingway subconsciously practicing his theory of omission.

I would first like to focus on Smith’s statement “that elements of the original conception of a story were ordinarily omitted or deleted at two stages in a complex process of writing” (“Hemingway’s Early Manuscripts” 270); that is, the invention and revision of a story. During the creative process, Hemingway first “invented away from or out of what he thought of as ‘the background of a story. You throw it all away and invent from what you know’²” (“Hemingway’s Early Manuscripts” 277). Smith then lists three patterns of revision that were revealed from his assessment of Hemingway’s short stories:

1. One, and sometimes two, manuscript versions, often with related fragments of variant introductions or conclusions;
2. One or more of Hemingway’s typescripts, sometimes with manuscript revisions, with which he decides upon one of the variant introductions or conclusions; and
3. A typescript (not by Hemingway) with relatively few revisions and close to the published version. (“Hemingway’s Early Manuscripts” 279)

² Beginning with “the background . . .” originally appeared in “The Art of the Short Story,” EH typescript #251, p. 9, Hemingway Collection, John F. Kennedy Library—quoted by Paul Smith.

If the modifications that occur in these two stages, invention and revision, are part of the foundation of the theory of omission, does it not make sense that any writer, including Hemingway, would struggle with their perfection in his or her first story? And in the case of Hemingway's first story, "Up in Michigan," does it not make sense that this struggle might result in what Smith deems "stylistic and structural revisions [that] are indecisive [and] inconsistent" ("Hemingway's Early Manuscripts" 287)?

With this understanding of invention and revision, I'd like to shift attention to the pre-publication drafts of "Up in Michigan" in order to demonstrate instances that allude to Hemingway subconsciously practicing the theory of omission. In their article "Reading 'Up in Michigan,'" Nancy R. Comley and Robert Scholes explain that "if a writer is talented enough, his fiction rings true: It sounds 'real'" (30). While crafting "Up in Michigan," Hemingway encountered his first affliction with separating fiction from fact.

First and foremost, "the story's central characters are named after a real Jim and Liz Dilworth" (Tyler 1), and in real life, Jim and Liz Dilworth had a son named "Wesley Dilworth, [who was] a boyhood friend of Hemingway" (Comley and Scholes 29). In the first pre-publication typescript, Hemingway excises the opening paragraph: "Wesley Dilworth got the dimple in his chin from his mother. Her name had been Liz Buell. Jim Dilworth married her when he came to Horton's Bay from Canada and bought the mill with A.J. Stroud" (KL/EH 800, 1). Although Wesley "was conceived four years after his parents, Elizabeth Buell and James Dilworth, were married" (Comley and Scholes 29), this is a very accurate display of how Hemingway invented a work of fiction from what he knew: a bit of fact. He had a "strong imagination [and] created fictions so believably well-wrought that his world became permanently ours" (Reynolds 18).

This idea of creating fiction from fact is further illustrated in a fragment of the story that is also not included in the published version. It is an excised ending that portrays Liz after her experience with Jim on the dock:

She woke up frightened and stiff and aching. It was still dark. "What if I have a baby?" She thought. It was the first time she had thought about it. It really was. She was so frightened the sweat ran down under her armpits . . . she was too frightened to cry. She thought about having a baby until it was morning. (KL/EH 801, 1)

Perhaps Hemingway chose not to include this ending because he knew it was not the strongest choice possible. Yet, one of his concerns in publishing the piece was "that he had based the story on the actions, both real and imaged, of real people" (Comley and Scholes 28).

Both this fragment and the excised paragraph (from KL/EH 800) that describes Wesley's chin and Jim and Liz's marriage are fictionalized to some extent, yet they also foreshadow actual events. Part of what makes "Up in Michigan" so interesting and

entertaining is that the reader is left with an ambiguous ending after Liz and Jim have their tryst out on the dock:

She was cold and miserable and everything felt gone. She walked back to where Jim was lying and shook him once more to make sure. She was crying.

“Jim,” she said, “Jim. Please, Jim.”

Jim stirred and curled a little tighter. Liz took off her coat and leaned over and covered him with it. She tucked it around him neatly and carefully. Then she walked across the dock and up the steep sandy road to go to bed. A cold mist was coming up through the woods from the bay. (SS 85–86)

What will happen the next morning when Jim sees Liz? This much the reader knows will occur, as Jim takes “his meals at D.J. Smith’s [and] Liz Coates work[s] for the Smith’s” (SS 81). Likewise, when Jim first returns from his hunting trip, “Liz hadn’t known just what would happen . . . but she was sure it would be something. Nothing had happened. The men were just home, that was all” (SS 83). Obviously, something *does* occur between Liz and Jim out on the dock, but what of the next morning? Will “something” happen, or “nothing”? Now that Liz is not “the neatest girl” (SS 81) she once was, will Jim revert to his previous habits where “he never thought about her” (SS 81)? Will he continue to “lie,” just as he was “lying” out on the dock?

These are critical examples of Smith’s first two patterns of revision:

1. One, and sometimes two, manuscript versions, often with related fragments of variant introductions or conclusions;
2. One or more of Hemingway’s typescripts, sometimes with manuscript revisions, with which he decides upon one of the variant introductions or conclusions. (“Hemingway’s Early Manuscripts” 279)

Had Hemingway chosen to not revise the introduction and conclusion, he would have given away too much information. As a result, the reader would have, or assume to have, all the answers. Hemingway wanted us “to read, to visualize, to participate actively in the creation of the story—and to follow threads of meaning without moving too quickly toward closure” (Comley and Scholes 34). Without omitting certain elements of the story, this would not be attainable. Part of what makes Hemingway’s writing so unique is that he “expects us to fill in the gaps of his narrative, to make the story our own” (Comley and Scholes 21). These gaps, or what is left out, are the result of the theory of omission.

The next example I’d like to discuss that alludes to Hemingway subconsciously practicing the theory of omission occurs in the conversation between Jim and the other men upon their return from their hunting trip. Hemingway’s revisions of the conversation from the pre-publication typescripts (KL/EH 800 and KL/EH 799) to the published version remove textual meaning and expose gaps in which the reader may deduce his or her own understanding.

In the first typescript, the conversation reads:

“Here’s how A.J.” Said Charley Weaver.

“That³ big buck Jim” said A.J.

“Looking at you A.J.” said Jim and downed his liquor.

“Tastes good to a man.”

“Nothing like itthis⁴ time of year.”

“How about another boys?”

“Next year A.J.”

“Over the River boys.”

“Here’s to crime.” (KL/EH 800, 4)

Upon reading the dialogue, it is evident that the men change topics multiple times. In lines one through three, Jim and Charley seem to give A.J.—presumably the oldest and more experienced of the three—a hard time for not killing the largest game of the trip. That credit is given to Jim, and his ego is growing because of it. Then in line four, there is a shift in the men’s speech and demeanor. When they first return from the hunting trip, Hemingway writes, “All the men had beards” (KL/EH 800, 3), and now these bearded men are drinking liquor and affirm that it “tastes good to a man” (KL/EH 800, 4). Is the assertion that it “tastes good to a man” (KL/EH 800, 4) somehow a cheap shot directed toward Jim? Is he not “manly” enough, which then compels him to reestablish his manliness by saying to Liz, “Come on for a walk” (SS 84)? Although we do not know how long it has been since he “came to Hortons Bay from Canada” (KL/EH 800, 1), we do know that he is “technically a foreigner” (Lupton 3). He is, admittedly, the newest member in the group. Is this his initiation?

Hemingway draws a distinct line between masculinity and femininity in the aforementioned lines. More importantly, as the night continues and the men become notably more drunk—“How about another boys?” (KL/EH 800, 4)—they are characterized as superior to women. The conversation occurs as the men “waited for supper” (KL/EH 800, 4); Liz and Mrs. Stroud are in the kitchen preparing their meal. Finally, the last line of dialogue—and, for that matter, who says it—sparks a further indication of the impulse that will occur later in the night. Though Hemingway removes which one of the men declares, “Here’s to crime” (KL/EH 800, 4), one can follow the preceding order of “Said Charley,” “said A.J.,” and “said Jim,” (KL/EH 800, 4) to deduce that it is Jim who toasts the evening to crime. Whether this was intentional or unintentional, I suspect it was Hemingway’s subconscious omitting yet another direct element of the story.

³ “That” is a handwritten emendation, possibly to emphasize the size of the buck. The typescript originally read “The”.

⁴ “itthis” is an error; Hemingway did not put a space between the two words “it” and “this”.

Now, I will compare the conversation to how it is depicted in the second typescript:

“Here’s looking at you A.J.” said Charley Weaver.
 “That damn big buck Jimmy” said A.J.
 “All the ones we missed A.J.” said Jim and downed his liquor.
 “Tastes good to a man.”
 “Nothing like it this time of the year for what ails you.”
 “How about another boys?”
 “Here’s how A.J.”
 “Over the river boys.”
 “Here’s to crime.” (KL/EH 799 4–5)

The emendations made in the second typescript are minimal, yet significant. Of predominate concern is the revision of “That big buck Jim” (KL/EH 800, 4) to “That damn big buck Jimmy” (KL/EH 799, 4). While my argument throughout this paper has been that Hemingway omitted elements of the story to strengthen it, here, he inserts a word and modifies a word. In both, however, he still enhances the story’s intrigue. First, the insertion of “damn” in KL/EH 799 further develops the distinct masculine connotation of the men’s dialogue. This curse word acts as a counterbalance to the modification of “Jimmy,” who was previously referred to as “Jim” in KL/EH 800. “Jimmy” instills a youthful or childlike connotation. Hemingway maintains this connotation later on as well; during the final scene in the second typescript, “Jim was sleeping with his mouth a little open” (KL/EH 799, 7). This revision from “Jim was sleeping heavily” (KL/EH 800, 6) creates a more intimate, childlike image of Jim asleep out on the dock. Furthermore, it reinforces the characterization of Liz as a maternal figure when later, she “took off her coat and leaned over and covered him with it” (KL/EH 799, 8).

Lastly, I will compare the conversation from the second typescript to the published version:

“Well, here’s looking at you, D.J.,” said Charley Wyman.
 “That damn big buck, Jimmy,” said D.J.
 “Here’s all the ones we missed, D.J.,” said Jim, and downed his liquor.
 “Tastes good to a man.”
 “Nothing like it this time of year for what ails you.”
 “How about another, boys?”
 “Here’s how, D.J.”
 “Down the creek, boys.”
 “Here’s to next year.” (SS 83–84)

Apart from the substantive emendations to alter names and the accidental emendations to maintain proper grammar, there is only one significant revision. Without a doubt, the excised “Here’s to crime” (KL/EH 799, 5) for the inserted “Here’s to next year” (SS 84) is an

indication of Hemingway subconsciously practicing the theory of omission. While the phrase in the published version may have been more appropriate for its time, it also removes the foreshadowing of events that will occur. Likewise, by omitting a preconceived awareness that a crime might occur, there is a lesser chance the reader will victimize Liz. Instead, the reader is allowed to “fill in the gaps of [Hemingway’s] narrative, to make the story [his or her] own” (Comley and Scholes 21).

By comparing the pre-publication typescripts of “Up in Michigan” with the published version, I have demonstrated specific instances that allude to Hemingway subconsciously practicing his theory of omission. During the creative process, he established a foundation of inventing fiction from what he knew as fact, and of revising his narrative in order to remove textual meaning. As a result, Hemingway exposed gaps in which the reader could deduce his or her own understanding.

During the time in which Hemingway invented and revised “Up in Michigan,” the theory of omission was already acknowledged by other writers as an implicit “version of the commonplace that the structures of literature, like the sentences of the language, imply more than they state and make us feel more than we know” (“Hemingway’s Early Manuscripts” 271). He arrived in Paris in December 1921, shortly after finishing the first draft of “Up in Michigan,” already “using some of the technique unconsciously” (Reynolds 31). Hemingway simply defined the theory of omission, in that “it is not the omission itself that matters, but the quality and quantity of what is omitted” (“Hemingway’s Early Manuscripts” 276).

To flawlessly execute the theory of omission is to write a story “without telling readers how to respond, what to feel, how to judge, let images convey meaning. If action is presented truly, precisely, using only its essential elements, then readers, without being told, will respond emotionally as the writer intended” (Reynolds 31). In the emendations Hemingway made to the pre-publication typescripts, he does just this. Although he didn’t realize it at the time, he was beginning to learn the craft of the theory of omission. The quality and quantity of what he removed was significant, and if left in, our entire understanding of “Up in Michigan” would be different.

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