



RESEARCH PAPER

Hemingway's The Killers: A Counter Narrative of the *Title and Code Hero*

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DOI

[http://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2022\(6-II\)99](http://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2022(6-II)99)

PAPER INFO

ABSTRACT

**Received:**

March 11, 2022

**Accepted:**

June 19, 2022

**Online:**

June 21, 2022

**Keywords:**

Autobiographical

Code Hero

Disillusionment

Effaced Narrator

Optimism

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This research aims at exploring and analyzing the human values of courage, bravery and optimism that Hemingway admired the most. "Hemingway's "code hero" is someone who is honorable, courageous, and adventurous and who exhibits grace under pressure. This research paper explores the counter narrative of the title and its first impression on the readers. It also explores the counter narrative of the protagonist, Ole Anderson, of the story, and an analysis how he does not represent the code hero of Hemingway. Detailed textual study of the short story "The Killers" has been done as a primary source for this research. The research finds that human values and priorities undergo a drastic change under certain conditions. The study recommends that positive human values must be kept in hand no matter how feeble is man's power and intellect before the hostile forces of nature and all other internal or external conflicts.

Introduction

"The Killers" is a short story written by the renowned American short story writer, a fiction writer and a novelist Ernest Hemingway in 1920's. It was very first time published in the March 1927 issue of *Scribner's Magazine* and consisted of 2951 words. *Ole Anderson* has been represented as *A Swede*, he is had been a heavy weight boxer and now is out of ring and residing in a hired room at *Hirsch's Rooming House* run by a lady *Mrs. Bell*. Another important character in the story is *Nick* who works in *Henry Lunch Room*. *Nick* is a typical Hemingway hero who is learning "the code." Hemingway's "code hero" is someone who is honorable, courageous, and adventurous and who exhibits grace under pressure.

This research paper explores the counter narrative of the title and its first impression on the readers. It also explores the counter narrative of the protagonist, *Ole Anderson*, of the story, and an analysis how he does not represent the code hero of Hemingway.

Born July 21, 1899, in Oak Park, Illinois, Ernest Miller Hemingway was the second child of Clarence Hemingway, a doctor, and Grace (Hall) Hemingway. Hemingway's middle-class upbringing was conventional, and after graduating in 1917 from Oak Park High School, he joined the *Kansas City Star* as a reporter. In 1918, Hemingway joined the Red Cross, driving an ambulance in Italy during the waning months of World War I. When Hemingway wrote "The Killers" in 1926, the United States was at the height of the Prohibition era, and criminal activity, particularly in Chicago, was rampant, with gangsters such as Al Capone and Dutch Schultz controlling the bootlegging industry and a good part of the police force as well. As a result of World War I, in which Hemingway served as an ambulance driver, and the catastrophic loss of human life (tens of millions killed and wounded), many people lost faith in God, ideas of nationhood, even reality itself. Theories by intellectuals and scientists such as Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson, Sir James George Frazer, Werner Heisenberg, and Albert Einstein presented the world as a place of uncertainty and chaos in which appearances are not what they seem.

### Literature Review

Overall the story gained a lot of popularity and was very much admired by its readers and by its audience of media adaptations. Two famous and popular examples of the media adaptations for *The Killers* are as under:

- 1-The Killers (1946), starring Burt Lancaster and Ava Gardner
- 2- The Killers (1956), a short film directed by Andrei Tarkovsky

"*In Our Time*", A collection of short stories featuring Nick Adams, an autobiographical character who also appears in future Hemingway stories. His second collection, *Men Without Women* (1927), contained many of what would become Hemingway's most popular and anthologized stories, including "The Killers" and "Hills Like White Elephants." In these stories, Hemingway perfected his spare, elliptical style, using dialogue almost exclusively to develop characters and drive his plot.

In his essay "Some Questions About Hemingway's 'The Killers'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Edward Stone notes many of the peculiarities of the story and contends that it is Al and Max's "surrealistic appearance" that shocks Nick, not the pervasiveness of crime or Ole's response to his circumstances. For Stone, the story belongs to Ole, not Nick. Charles Owen, in "Time and the Contagion of Flight in 'The Killers,'" says that the story belongs neither to Nick or Ole but to readers, who, like Nick, retain "faith in expedients, a faith that makes him representative of a whole tradition in American culture." (Edward Stone)

### Material and Methods

Qualitative research methodology has been adopted in this piece of research. The original text of the story published in Scribner's Magazine and the short story book of Hemingway, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* have been taken as primary sources for analysis and exploration of the research questions. The literary terms, devices and figures of speech have been used in the work are allegory, symbolism, Ein Stein's theory of Relativity, Irony and the effaced narrator.

"The Killers" remains one of Hemingway's most anthologized stories because it is representative of Hemingway's style and the subjects that would occupy his work throughout his career. These subjects include the meaninglessness of human life, male camaraderie, and the inevitability of death, and Hemingway explores them using his signature short sentences, slang, and understatement.

### **Background Source for the Title of the Story**

Historians have some documents showing that the working title of the piece was "The Matadors". The story takes place in Summit, Illinois during the 1920s' during prohibition when the organized crime was at its peak. Chicago was the home of Al Capone, and Hemingway himself spent time in Chicago as a young man. Not long ago before the story was written, the Chicago mob had killed a popular boxer of the time, Andre Anderson. That may have been taken as a background to the central plot of the story by Hemingway.

Presently the title of the story *The Killers* appears to bring thrill and surprise for the readers. The reader is expected to have an impression of fear, murder and brutality. But nothing like violence, brutality or murder does take place in the story and that is the thing that disappoints the reader. An apparent looking crime story as its title suggests, proves mere an illusion of the crime and thrill stories. It may be said an anti crime story where the act of murder and criminology is only made fun of.. The so called hired killers and brutal murderers are enjoying food in a restaurant and having fun with the servants of the restaurant. It seems they are not for murdering there but only came to kill their time in a leisurely manner.

Many of the characters present equally puzzling, if not deceptive, fronts. The two killers' appearance is so similar that they lose any individuality at all – both are "about the same size," and they are "dressed like twins." When they walk away from the restaurant, they are described as looking "like a vaudeville team." Furthermore, they do not even resemble what they are supposed to be – killers. At one point they ask an intentionally rhetorical question: "Do we look silly?" The apparently unneeded answer is "No," for these are two cold, fearsome hit men carrying sawed-off shotguns. But the real answer is "Yes," they do look silly, with their identical dress, derby hats, tight-fitting dark overcoats, and gloves – looking indeed like a vaudeville team. (Quentin E. Martina)

### **Comparison of Ole Anderson and Santiago**

Ole Anderson, the protagonist of the story is shown a very weak personality. The image, the readers of Hemingway have in their minds by reading the short novel *The Old Man and The Sea*, is all shattered to the ground. On a large scale comparison between Ole Anderson of *The Killers* and Santiago from *The Old Man and The Sea* gives a widely and unmatched pictures of the two. Reader is confused of the differences of values projected by these two creations of Hemingway. If Hemingway cherished love, sympathy, bravery, skill, determinations and high level of optimism as shown in the novel *The Old Man and The Sea*, where is all these values projected by the protagonist in the story *The Killers*?

"But a man is not made for defeat," "A man can die but not be defeated"

*(The Old Man and The Sea, pp.23, 25)*

Why a creation of the same author be a paragon of optimism and great courage on one side(Santiago) and a mere lost and defeated dull person on the other hand(Ole Anderson) is really a matter of serious concern and it arrests the attention of the readers and viewers of its media adaptations under great confusion.

Nick looked at the big man lying on the bed.

"Don't you want me to go and see the police?"

"No," Ole Anderson said. "That wouldn't do any good."

"Isn't there something I could do?"

"No. There ain't anything to do."

"Maybe it was just a bluff."

"No. It ain't just a bluff."

Ole Anderson rolled over toward the wall. *(The Killers, pp.230)*

### **The Philosophy of Code Hero**

The question arises which of the two Ole Anderson and Santiago respectively a real code hero of Hemingway. *The Killers* does not answer and justify the readers on such questions. This may be a technical flaw in the story or the representation of a change in outlook and thoughts of the author with the passage of time. If it is a change of thought and outlook towards life then it is a great positive sign in the author's attitude towards life as there is almost a gap of thirty between these both creations of Hemingway. It shows Hemingway defeated death and hurdles, broke the negating barriers of pessimism and successfully travelled to the road of optimism in these thirty years of his life.

Nick distinguishes himself from others by his ability to endure and to face death with dignity. Such traits define the code hero's manhood. In short, Nick is learning the code of how to be a man, according to Hemingway's idea of what constitutes manhood. In their essay on Hemingway's story, Cleanth Brooks, Jr. and Robert Penn Warren argue, "it is the tough man ... the disciplined man, who actually is aware of pathos or tragedy." Such a man, the two argue, "has learned that the only way to hold on to 'honor,' to individuality, to, even, the human order ... is to live by his code." Nick is still developing the code. His experience with the killers marks his initiation into a world of brutality and random events. Critics often argue over the real protagonist of "The Killers."

Ole Anderson is a Swede and a former heavyweight boxer who lives in Hirsch's rooming house. He usually eats at Henry's lunchroom around six in the evening but does not show up the day Al and Max come to kill him. When Nick visits him to warn him about the men, Ole is lying on his bed facing the wall. Ole thanks Nick for telling him but is resigned to his fate. He tells Nick that he has not been able to get out of bed and go outside and that he is "through with all that running around."

"George thought I better come and tell you about it."

"There isn't anything I can do about it," Ole Anderson said.

"I'll tell you what they were like."

"I don't want to know what they were like," Ole Anderson said. He looked at the wall. "Thanks for coming to tell me about it." (*The Killers*, pp.229)

### **Effaced Narrator**

Hemingway had been a great story teller and a fine narrator of the characters. Hemingway uses an "effaced" narrator in "The Killers." This means that the narrator is practically invisible. An effaced narrator does not have access to characters' thinking, which is revealed solely through their dialogue. However, in his essay "Point of View in the Nick Adams Stories," Carl Ficken points out:

Hemingway is able to place Nick sufficiently forward in the account so that the meaning of the story has to do with Nick's discovery of what life is like through those killers and Ole Anderson's reaction to them. Hemingway popularized this method of narration for short story writers and novelists in the twentieth century. (Carl Ficken)

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition who writes about literature and culture for various publications. In this essay, Semansky considers the idea of waiting in Hemingway's story.

"Rife with images of waiting, "The Killers" embodies a range of Hemingway's ideas on the human condition, from his notion of "nada" to his code of manly behavior. By foregrounding waiting, Hemingway creates suspense, develops characters, and suggests themes that lesser writers might take twice as many pages to accomplish. Ole himself, of course, the object of the killers' waiting, waits, face turned towards the wall, resignation deep. In his belief that death will come to him and there is nothing he can do about it, the ex-boxer illustrates Hemingway's nihilism, his idea of the meaninglessness of human existence. This idea, encapsulated in the Spanish word "nada," or nothingness, crops up often in Hemingway stories". (Chris Semansky)

### **Post-War outlook**

Anderson represented many old men of his time who did not find anything interesting or worth attention in life after their active years. Life and death were now equal to him. This may be a Post-War outlook. It was also due to the changed behavior of the people towards its elders and the intensity of the organized crimes that forced the weaker especially to be made more alert and confined in their homes.

"That's all right."

"The only thing is," he said, talking toward the wall, "I just can't make up my mind to go out. I been in here all day."

"Couldn't you get out of town?"

"No," Ole Anderson said. "I'm through with all that running around."

He looked at the wall.

"There ain't anything to do now." (The Killers, pp.231)

### **Conclusion**

"The Killers" is a story that deals with the familiar Hemingway themes of courage, disillusionment, death, and futility. Nick Adams, Hemingway's semi-autobiographical narrator in a whole series of short stories, performs a clear act of heroism but is disappointed by the result of it. "The Killers" is the story of Nick Adams's coming-of-age through a showing of heroism and his ultimate disillusionment as his courage fails to make a difference. The apparent tragedy of this story is that Anderson expresses no alarm at his killers' presence and will probably be gunned down without a struggle, but the true tragedy is that Nick's selfless act of heroism produced no positive result and was therefore futile. Code hero is key figure in the works of Hemingway that works as a mouth piece for the values Hemingway cherishes the most. Anderson does not perform the role of Hemingway's mouth piece fully. The title of the story apparently does not cope with the content and the main structure of the plot of the story.

This paper can be used to explore further ideas in the story on the style and the narration of the story. "Style is the Man", it keeps changing constantly as the life of a man brings maturity in ideas and representation.

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