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No Man is an Island: Epigraph to *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

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Abstract

Aim: *War, an ongoing clash of realities still scars the world —from the ruins of Syria to the unfolding* humanitarian *crisis in Gaza. Amid such devastation, literature too remains a constant, acting as a tool to introspect and grapple with the emotional and moral toll of conflict. Ernest Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls, set during the Spanish Civil War, speaks powerfully to this enduring reality. The text is not simply a figment of creative imagination but rather an embodiment of Hemingway's lived experience who served as a war correspondent during the conflict. The paper examines the significance of the epigraph to the novel For Whom the Bell Tolls by Ernest Hemingway.*

Methodology and approach: *The research conducts a textual analysis of Ernest Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls, drawing a comparison to John Donne's Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, effectively locating it amongst the broad literary tradition and its attributed greatness.*

Outcome*: Apart from foreshadowing the novel's themes of mortality, interconnectedness of humanity and the cost of war, epigraph functions as a moral lens that underscores the ethical dilemmas faced by Hemingway's characters. The outcome of this study reveals how the epigraph is not merely decorative or prefatory and rather the heart of the narrative that insists on the resonating nature of death, binding all of humanity in collective grief.*

Conclusion and suggestion: *This study concludes that the epigraph to For Whom the Bell Tolls is indispensable to the novel's emotional structure. By weaving Donne's meditative lines into a narrative of war, Hemingway compels readers to confront the paradox of war: the brutality of killing and yet the compelling necessity of it. Future research may explore how epigraphs in other wartime literature function similarly, as ethical touchstones or narrative anchors and offer the readers a way to process their grief.*

Keywords: Hemingway, war literature, epigraph, Spanish war, John Donne, etc.

Introduction

The term *epigraph* is derived from the Greek word *epigraphē*, meaning an inscription on a building or statue. In literature, it is a phrase, quotation, or poem set at the beginning of a document, which may serve as a preface to the work. An epigraph serves various functions: apart from signalling the theme of the narrative, it helps situate the work within a larger legacy of literary tradition. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway draws on a powerful epigraph from John Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*: *"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main... Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind... And therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."* By invoking Donne, Hemingway places his novel within a broader philosophical and literary tradition, using the epigraph to reflect on mortality, community, and spiritual connection.

The epigraph thus becomes a bridge between eras of crisis—Donne's religious contemplation in the face of illness and Hemingway's depiction of collective suffering in wartime Spain. It reminds the reader that the war's anguish and moral dilemmas are not confined to any time or place but are part of a continuum of human experience explored in literature across centuries.

While the epigraph frames the novel in terms of shared human experience, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* explores this idea through the brutal and immediate realities of war. Set during the Spanish Civil War, the novel contemplates the toll that armed conflict takes on civilians, communities, and soldiers on both sides of the divide. Hemingway's portrayal of war is not an isolated battlefield event but a fractured and far-reaching force that destroys families, reshapes identities, and leads to both personal and collective suffering. It showcases how an individual's fate is tied to the choices and sacrifices made by others. As Dr. Jagdish Joshi et al. note, "In some way, every other person is a part of our own self, of who we really are – so when another person is lost, we lose something too. Hence the idea that whenever the bell tolls, it tolls for us – whenever somebody dies, it's as if a part of us dies" (Joshi and Vaishnav 13).

María's story is one of the most evident manifestations of this interconnectedness. The trauma she carries—her father's execution, her mother's death, and her assault—is the direct result of political violence instigated by others. Notably, her mother was not even a Republican, yet she was still killed for proclaiming, "Viva my husband who was the Mayor of this village" (Hemingway 188). Violence touches all lives, regardless of allegiance, and though María did not choose to participate in the war, her life has been irreversibly altered by it. After witnessing her parents' deaths, María is captured and raped by Falangists on a train. Hemingway does not narrate the graphic details of the sexual assault. It is told to the readers through her silences, brave attempts to love again, and ultimately Robert Jordan's ears. As Maria shares her story, her trauma becomes Robert Jordan's trauma. The epigraph is not just a

framing device—it becomes a lived reality in the novel, where all human lives are interconnected, and the death or suffering of one affects the whole of humanity.

The novel further echoes the epigraph's assertion that "any man's death diminishes me" through the character of Primitivo. Though he is not present during the ambush at El Sordo's, the sound of distant gunfire unsettles him deeply. He reacts with visible misery and is adamant about offering aid to his comrades. However, he is left helpless when Robert Jordan and Pilar remind him that joining Sordo would be a suicidal act. Primitivo's mourning reflects an instinctive empathy—a recognition that someone is dying and that death, even at a distance, carries emotional weight. Though Sordo's group is not part of his immediate band, their loss weighs heavily on him. Primitivo does not need to witness the deaths firsthand; the gunfire alone is enough to pull him into a state of grief and fear. His response mirrors the tolling of a funeral bell—a public signal of private sorrow. In this way, Primitivo becomes an ethical counterpoint to the numbness or detachment often associated with war. His compassion quietly affirms Donne's belief in the interconnectedness of all human lives.

The text insists that the reader confront the paradox of the war. As Walter J Saltoff writes in The "Great Sin" in "For Whom the Bell Tolls," "It has been recognized also that Hemingway has achieved a high degree of honesty and artistic neutrality by emphasizing Loyalist as well as Fascist atrocities and by showing the humanity of various characters on the Fascist side (Slatoff 142)." Robert Jordan himself grapples with the cost of taking life, even when convinced that his cause is just. After killing a young soldier and reading his personal letters, Jordan questions, "Don't you know it is wrong to kill? Yes. But you do it? Yes. And you still believe absolutely that your cause is right? Yes." This painful admission illustrates how Hemingway refuses to let his characters retreat into blind patriotism or comforting ideologies. Instead, he forces them—and, by extension, the reader—to "get it straight" and acknowledge that every act of violence carries a moral cost. Anselmo, who has also killed, confesses that even necessary killing is a sin and that forgiveness is still required—with or without God. This complex moral landscape aligns with the ethical clarity in Wilfred Owen's *Strange Meeting*, where the dead soldier tells his killer, "I am the enemy you killed, my friend." Like Owen, Hemingway dismantles the illusion of enemies, revealing how war collapses the boundaries between self and other.

While the primary protagonists of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* hail from the Republican side, Hemingway deliberately extends the narrative to encompass the perspectives of Fascist soldiers as well. In doing so, he avoids a reductive binary of divide between Loyalists and Rebels and rather shows men on both sides. He portrays individuals on both sides as men burdened with fear, duty, and the persistent shadow of death. These are not just soldiers fighting for opposing ideologies—they are human beings trying to survive each day, haunted by the knowledge that death may be imminent.

Lieutenant Berrendo, a Fascist officer complicates the moral landscape of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Lieutenant Berrendo, tasked with the brutal beheading of Republican prisoners, is not depicted as sadistic or blindly loyal; rather, he performs the act himself, taking on the weight of violence with grim solemnity. His decision to carry out the executions personally,

rather than delegating the task, suggests a conflicted sense of duty—an attempt to enact mercy within the brutality of war. Later, Berrendo quietly acknowledges the horror of his actions, feeling no arrogance in his victory. He feels no triumph in the act; on the contrary, he finds it barbaric. Yet, he justifies it as a necessary obligation, a soldier's grim duty to ensure identification and proof of death. In Berrendo, Hemingway presents a man torn between decency and discipline, revealing how even on the "enemy" side, war demands actions that deeply wound the soul.

Lieutenant Berrendo serves as a moral foil to Anselmo despite operating on opposite sides—both deeply human, both weighed down by the violence they are required to enact. Anselmo is painfully aware that war often leaves no space for moral purity. In a moment of quiet anguish, he asks Robert Jordan to repeat the plan to blow up the bridge, seeking reassurance, structure, anything to ground himself. He is only able to kill once Jordan frames it as a direct command—a distinction that allows Anselmo to displace moral responsibility and endure the weight of his actions: "I will do as thou orderest" (Hemingway 82). Neither man derives satisfaction from violence; both are haunted by it. In their quiet anguish and sense of moral responsibility, Hemingway presents a shared humanity that transcends ideological divides. Through them, the novel enacts the message of Donne's epigraph: that every death, regardless of allegiance, diminishes us all. It is not the cause alone that defines the men in this novel, but their capacity to feel, reflect, and mourn—even in the midst of a war.

Hemingway's war is one where men are turned into instruments, yet the novel never lets us forget their humanity. The bell tolls constantly in the background—not just for the dead, but for those who survive with the burden of memory. But Hemingway goes a step forward, incorporating the "New Spanish Women" in his text who refuse to be sidelined. War becomes a female-populated landscape through Maria's transformation from a traumatised victim into a militia woman and Pilar's unflinching leadership and fierce loyalty to the Republican cause. Over the course of the narrative, Maria evolves from a traumatised woman to someone who channels her grief into determination. She asks Jordan to teach her to shoot and shows him a razor blade she plans to use on herself rather than face further fascist brutality. Her transformation symbolises a refusal to be powerless, marking her growth from a passive victim to an active agent in her own fate. Pilar, meanwhile, commands the guerrilla band with a strength that earns Robert Jordan's respect: "Without the woman, there is no organization nor discipline here and with the woman it can be very good" (Hemingway 69). Far from passive, supportive characters, these women are recognised not just for their quiet courage and emotional support but as active, powerful figures deeply involved in the war. They fortify the men around them with quiet durability and fierce resolve, offering a semblance of peace in the devastating chaos of war.

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