

English 124 Advanced Composition

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Essay Assignment #3: Comparison/Contrast of O'Connor and Hemingway Stories

Compare any story of Flannery O'Connor's with any short story by Ernest Hemingway. Your purpose will be to shed light on both authors (to help readers to understand them better) by placing their stories side by side and drawing conclusions about them. Point out similarities, differences, or both, but remember that your purpose is not merely to notice these but to draw conclusions. How do we understand O'Connor better by looking at

what Hemingway does? How do we understand Hemingway better by looking at what O'Connor does? How can we better understand the overall purposes, philosophies, world views of the authors as a result of our comparison or contrast? Finally, please do not bore your readers by belaboring obvious differences: Point out surprising points of similarity—or surprising differences in dealing with similar matter.

O'CONNOR AND HEMINGWAY

Considering their biographies, it would be hard to find two people more dissimilar than Flannery O'Connor and Ernest Hemingway. O'Connor, as you know, was a woman who lived alone with her mother most of her life, isolated in rural Georgia, an invalid, rarely leaving home, and dying of lupus at a young age. Hemingway was a man who lived an exceptionally active life, enjoying such "blood-sports" as bull-fighting, big-game hunting, and deep-sea fishing, and participating in nearly every war in his lifetime in which he was either old enough or, later, young enough to fight. He was married four times, was an international celebrity, and was in his sixties when he died by a self-inflicted shotgun blast to the head.

Ironically, especially given these life circumstances, O'Connor wrote about violence, and Hemingway wrote about relationships. But the difference in their writing goes further: O'Connor wrote to shock us into an awareness of the spirituality inherent in human life; Hemingway had no such lofty aims, considering it challenge enough to record accurately what he saw and understood about life in the here and now.

O'CONNOR'S APPROACH

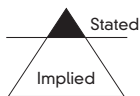
VIOLENT

"You have to make your vision apparent by shock. To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling pictures."

HEMINGWAY'S APPROACH

SUBTLE

"I always try to write on the principle of the ICEBERG. There is seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows."



tion, did not feel that she could risk such subtlety: If one's goal is to hit someone between the eyes with a two-by-four, one will be direct.

BASIS OF COMPARISON/CONTRAST

Your goal in this assignment will be to find a Hemingway story that you like and compare it to an O'Connor story. It will be crucial that you discover a useful basis of comparison, one which sheds new light on mean-

ing. This will eventually be shaped into your thesis statement, something like this:

Because of her sacramentalism, Flannery O'Connor's **approach to nature** in "Revelation" is substantially different from Ernest Hemingway's in "Big Two Hearted River."

Notice that, in addition to your subject, your basis of comparison, you will want to mention both authors and both stories by name in your thesis statement. Similarly you must mention these in your title:

Spirituality and Nature in O'Connor's "Revelation" and Hemingway's "Big Two Hearted River"

Be sure not to waste your readers' time by grinding out lists of details that would be obvious with a few minutes' thinking. Surprise your readers. No one will want to read an essay about how no characters in "Good Country People" are bull-fighting *aficionados* or that nobody in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" is a Georgia sharecropper. It

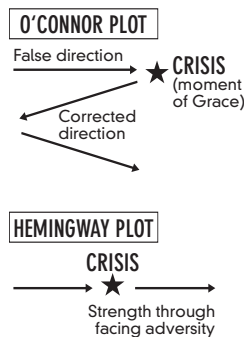
might be fascinating, though, to explore the surprising similarity between O'Connor's and Hemingway's treatments of cross-purposes in male/female relationships.

APPROACHES TO YOUR SUBJECT

I encourage you to write about any basis of comparison that suggests itself to you. To get the wheels turning here are some ideas.

□ Address the O'Connor story you wrote about in Essay #1, considering how your thesis applies to your Hemingway story. How is his treatment of theme, style, plot structure, etc. different from or similar to O'Connor's. What do the differences and similarities tell us about what these authors are saying? You might similarly choose one of the stories you discussed in Essay #2, considering how your thesis there applies to Hemingway.

□ We know that O'Connor strove to bring her characters and her readers to a "moment of Grace" in each of her stories. Is there an analogous



O'CONNOR FOCUS

HUMAN EXPERIENCE → SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

"The [writer] with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural...."

HEMINGWAY FOCUS

HUMAN EXPERIENCE → SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

"Maybe if you found out how to live... you learned from that what it was all about."

The ultimate goal of the critic is to allow readers to return to the literature with greater understanding and hence to enjoy it more.

epiphany in your Hemingway story? What do we readers or the characters realize in the epiphany each author develops? What does the *content* of a Hemingway epiphany show us about his world view? If his epiphanies are different from O'Connor's, how does the contrast illuminate both authors' work? In what different ways do these different epiphany *change* the characters or *affect their development*?

□ Does Hemingway attempt to deal with any of the elements we have noticed in O'Connor's fiction? Look for his approach to *suffering, death, intellect v. ignorance, violence, the grotesque, spirituality, etc.* How is his approach different? What meaning can you find in surprising similarities?

□ How is O'Connor's fiction different from or similar to Hemingway's in her use of any one of the elements of fiction (see Griffith, Chapter 3)?

- Plot
- Characterization
- Theme
- Setting
- Irony
- Point of View
- Symbolism

□ Consider analyzing your two stories by employing any of the specialized critical approaches discussed in class (see Griffith, Chapter 8): *historical, biographical, or social (Marxist) criticism; Freudian or Jungian (archetypal) psychological criticism; the "New" criticism; structuralist or post-structuralist (deconstructionist) criticism; reader-response, new historicist, or feminist criticism.*

□ How have Hemingway and O'Connor *entertained* us in their stories? In addition to developing their meanings or their "messages," how have these authors employed such literary elements as *humor or wit, suspense, surprise, and beautiful or suggestive language*?

PLOT SUMMARY

As always, please remember to *assume that your reader has already read the stories*. Spend nearly all of your time explaining meaning, analyzing the stories, and very little time retelling them. *Structure your essay around your discussion*, interjecting plot detail only as is necessary to clarify your comments, perhaps briefly to remind your reader.

EVIDENCE

Again, as in all of the essays you write for me, *support the claims you make with solid evidence from the stories themselves*. Be sure to quote, paraphrase, and summarize amply. You may claim anything you want to as long as you can back up what you say with textual evidence.

CHOOSING YOUR HEMINGWAY STORY

A word of warning: There will be a strong temptation to choose the shortest possible Hemingway story. (I have been a student myself for many, many years, so I know what it is like to work against deadlines.) Please, for your own sake, resist this temptation. As I mentioned above, one of Hemingway's primary contributions to literature was his ex-

treme brevity: Sometimes I suspect that he started with ten pages of draft manuscript and then—perhaps on a bet—worked to reduce it to ten *words*, suggesting key plot details and character traits in the most oblique manner imaginable. Because this is always the case with Hemingway, the shortest of his stories are often the most dangerous, the most difficult to analyze—simply because he implies so much in them, saying so very much without actually saying it. As a rule of thumb, then, *stay away from stories of less than, say, three pages*.

I will be happy to make suggestions. Let me know which O'Connor story you have in mind, and I will recommend an appropriate Hemingway story for comparison. On the other hand, that will only recycle my own preconceptions. I know what I think already. I desperately want to learn something I do not know already: Your essay will be valuable if it shocks me, revealing surprising points of enlightenment that occur to you in your own critical reading. So get ahold of a Hemingway collection, and read stories until you find one that appeals to you, that opens your eyes to suggestive points of comparison or contrast with O'Connor.

READING YOUR HEMINGWAY STORY

Hemingway doesn't write like O'Connor, but his approach to the short story is different from most other writers' too. Here are some tips for reading the stories:

□ *Think of them as poems*—extremely compressed language. Underneath their brevity and ultra-pared-down diction lies intense meaning. He called this his "iceberg principle": only one eighth appears above the surface, gets written, and the rest is merely implied. Your job will be to find the remaining seven eighths of your story.

□ As is the case with most poems, *there is rarely a "message" or even a definable rhetorical thesis in a Hemingway story*. In "Snows of Kilimanjaro" he describes his process: He has had an experience which he considers important, but he has no idea why that he can articulate. But if he can deliver the experience with total honesty, total clarity, meaning will come through, even if it isn't definable as an abstraction. Think of the stories as *snapshots of these meaningful moments*, not as illustrations of philosophical ideas.

□ As part of Hemingway's compression, *he often uses what appear to be mere narrative events to communicate a character's inner experience*. For example, in "Hills Like White Elephants" a woman is agonizing over a relationship that is drying up. The author never tells us this, but in the course of a heated conversation between the the woman and her partner, Hemingway simply mentions, apparently off-handedly, where she is looking—first across the valley at barren hills, then to the other side of the valley which is fertile and rich. Apparently apropos of nothing then, she says, "And we could have all this." (Incidentally, Harold Bloom calls HLWE one of the greatest *poems* ever written. I agree.) □