

Ernest Hemingway: Macho man of letters

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(CNN) -- Many would argue that he wasn't the greatest American writer, or even the creator of the best American book. But Ernest Miller Hemingway certainly is the American writer, an undeniable collision of literary talent and iconic personality.



He took Americans around the world with his new style of fiction, and he took fiction to new levels of pop culture status. More than a writer, he was the war hero, the war correspondent, the expatriate, the lion hunter, the marlin fisherman, the overbearing ego, the tragic figure.

Spurring him through life was a restlessness that never ceased, putting him in touch with a common humanity that populated his celebrated novels.

"Almost every decade, he's in a new location. There's a totally new group of friends, and a certain number of sycophants, I think," says Dr. James Nagel, one of the world's leading scholars on Hemingway.

At times, it's difficult to decipher where Hemingway's life and his legend part. But there is an overwhelming amount of information on his life.

From his birth in Oak Park, Illinois, through the novels that were taken from his own experiences to his death at 62, Hemingway's life was thoroughly documented.

Still, "there are questions about him that have never been answered and that's probably one reason we're still talking about him," says Redd Griffin, historian and board member of the Ernest Hemingway Foundation of Oak Park.

"If you get too fixated on Hemingway, you lose the ability to understand him," says Michael Reynolds, author of several books on Hemingway's life. "He's like a deep well: You fall in and you may never come out."

His is the story of how an innocent boy with an adventurous heart set out to become the most recognized writer of his time, the white-bearded man affectionately known as "Papa."

The early years: 1899-1926

Ernest Miller Hemingway grew up during a time of great change in America. It was the turn of the century, a period which saw much collision between old world idealism and new world possibilities.

Hemingway was born on July 21, 1899, in Oak Park, Illinois, a well-to-do township near Chicago. He was the second child of Grace Hall and Clarence Edmonds Hemingway in a family that would eventually include four girls and two boys.

While there are stories that Hemingway had a troubled childhood, the early seeds of a writer were evident and nurtured.

His father was a doctor who interested Ernest in sciences and objective reasoning. Ernest's mother taught music and made sure her children were well-schooled in the arts.

Both parents were involved in their church, giving their children a strong foundation in religion, morals and values.

"He really grew up with a rich environment of culture, religion and the sciences," says Griffin.

Even in his early years, Hemingway provoked varied responses from the people around him.

"There are those here who said he could be a bully," Griffin says. "People here, either they loved him or hated him; there was no in between. He had that effect on people."

Young Hemingway was also an avid explorer, heading to nearby woods for hikes and fishing expeditions with boyhood pals.

"I think he always wanted to explore, ... I think there was a restlessness in him," says Griffin.

There were also the summer treks to Michigan, which became the basis for later stories, including "Big Two-Hearted River."

The writer in Hemingway was also taking form. In school, Hemingway penned stories that are now forgettable but show raw talent.

"His themes were almost always read aloud in class as examples of what we should all strive for," remembered Susan Lowery, a high school classmate.

After graduating from high school, Hemingway moved to Kansas City, Missouri, to work as a cub reporter for the Star, covering the local beat that included fires, work strikes and crime. His stay there lasted from the fall of 1917 to the spring of 1918, but he cited the experience as invaluable.

Years later, Hemingway would point to the Kansas City Star stylebook as the guideline he had followed throughout his literary career. It instructed its writers to use "short declarative sentences," something Hemingway would trademark in his streamlined prose.

In 1918, Hemingway left the Star to volunteer in World War I as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross. He was wounded in both legs by mortar and machine-gun fire, and while recuperating in a hospital in Milan fell in love with a nurse.

Agnes von Kurowsky, an American-born 26-year-old, was 7 1/2 years older than Hemingway and had a reputation for being a flirt. She was extremely popular with the male patients.

Hemingway, a friend to her at first, eventually fell under her spell, and she too seems to have had feelings for Hemingway.

The relationship is a focus of debate for many scholars -- some believe it was a serious love affair, but others maintain it bordered on a crush for Hemingway. Regardless, the experience eventually led to Hemingway's classic "A Farewell to Arms" (1929), which many critics point to as his best work.

The story revolves around a World War I ambulance driver who is injured in action and falls for his nurse. It has a tragic end, reflecting the Lost Generation's post-war disenchantment.

In reality, Hemingway returned to the States a war hero ("the first American casualty in Italy"), decorated for his courage and the injuries he suffered. But he was not able to keep Agnes' affections.

Although they kept in touch with each other throughout their lives, Agnes ended the affair with a letter that read in part, "I can't get away from the fact that you're just a boy -- a kid"

"Then -- & believe me when I say this is sudden for me, too -- I expect to be married soon."

Hemingway was heartbroken, but he moved on. Living in Chicago, writing free-lance pieces, he met the wealthy Hadley Richardson through literary friends. They were married in 1921.

He also became acquainted with writer Sherwood Anderson, who told Hemingway that if he was serious about becoming a novelist, he should move to Paris and live among the expatriate writers there. Hemingway and Hadley were soon on a boat to Europe, with letters of introduction to the likes of Gertrude Stein and Ford Madox Ford.

It's easy to wonder what might have become of Hemingway if he never ventured to Paris. His time spent there was perhaps the greatest apprenticeship of any 20th-century artist.

"If he hadn't been in Paris when he was, I'm not sure he would have turned out to be the Hemingway we know," says Reynolds, whose books on Hemingway include "Hemingway: The Paris Years." "Between January of '22 and April of '24, he transformed himself."

The Hemingways paid the bills with Hadley's trust fund and with work Ernest did for the Toronto Star. In his free time -- when he wasn't spending idle hours at Paris cafes or traversing the European countryside -- he worked on his fiction and blossomed under the guidance of Stein, Ford, Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald and James Joyce.

In 1923, Hemingway was published. His collection "Three Stories and Ten Poems" was printed in Paris by Robert McAlmon. It was also during this time that Hemingway became a father, his wife giving birth to a boy named John Hadley Nicanor, who was nicknamed "Bumby."

In 1924 and 1925, two versions of "In Our Time" were published, a collection of stories featuring Hemingway's alter-ego, Nick Adams. At this time, Hemingway was also forming one of literature's most interesting friendships with Fitzgerald, author of the 1925 classic "The Great Gatsby."

The two made an unlikely pair -- Hemingway still developing into the man's man, with a sharp writing style; and Fitzgerald, the soft romantic whom Hemingway would later reduce to a sexually insecure man, who was infatuated with the rich.

But there seemed to be a collective effort by Hemingway's many writer-mentors to witness the birth of his first novel.

It came in 1926, and Hemingway's life would never be the same. "The Sun Also Rises" was an international success. The story, based on Hemingway's own experiences, chronicled a group of American expatriates living in Paris who travel to Pamplona, Spain, for the San Fermin Festival, or "the running of the bulls."

Although Hemingway's career was taking off, his personal life was showing cracks. Hemingway began a relationship with Pauline Pfeiffer, a close friend of both Hadley and Ernest. By 1927, Hadley would divorce Hemingway, who would promptly marry Pauline.

Hemingway was also cutting his ties with the Paris group that helped him.

"I think Hemingway had some significant strengths as a writer and human being, but he also had profound weaknesses," says Hemingway scholar Dr. James Nagel. "One of his weaknesses is that he seems not to have been very good at feeling gratitude. He tended to turn his back on people who helped him.

"He turned his back on the Paris group," Nagel says.

In the next year, Hemingway and Pauline would settle in Key West, Florida and Hemingway would attempt to build on his reputation as one of America's pre-eminent writers.

The adventurer: 1927-1945

(It was around the time "The Sun Also Rises" was published that Hemingway's life went through profound changes -- some associated with his newfound success, others attributed to the roller-coaster ride of life.

As he worked on "A Farewell to Arms," he lost his father to suicide.

Clarence Hemingway had been battling depression and health problems. Apparently unable to cope any longer, he shot himself in the head on December 6, 1928.

In some letters, Hemingway treats his father's suicide almost as an inconvenience; in others, he expresses how much he loves and misses him. Taken as a whole, his various recorded comments on the suicide could reflect the emotional extremes of a person in mourning.

In a letter to his editor at Scribner's, Max Perkins, he wrote: "I was very fond of him and feel like hell about it. Got to Oak Park in plenty of time to handle things ... Realize of course that the thing for me to do is not worry but get to work -- finish my book ('A Farewell to Arms') properly so I can help them out with the proceeds."

Eventually, Hemingway settled into a patterned life with Pauline in Key West. The couple had two boys, Patrick (born in 1928) and Gregory Hancock (born in 1931).

For Hemingway, the years in Key West proved productive. Though the writer had earned a reputation as a heavy drinker, Hemingway scholar Nagel says work came first.

"Hemingway lived a very disciplined life," Nagel says. "Everything was calculated to the fact that the next morning he was going to be at his desk at 6 a.m. and he was going to work for three or four or five hours on his fiction."

After work, according to Nagel, Hemingway would have a drink before lunch, eat, then spend the rest of his afternoon fishing or engaging in an outdoor activity.

"At dinnertime, they might have a drink before dinner and the wine with dinner and nothing after that because drinking anything after dinner would interfere with his ability to get up at 5:30, 6 the next morning and start working again," says Nagel.

That's not to say Hemingway didn't enjoy himself. Anyone who has been to Key West knows that Hemingway developed a friendship with bar owner and bootlegger "Sloppy" Joe Russell.

Hemingway also invited literary friends -- Perkins or Scott Fitzgerald, for instance -- to join him on fishing excursions in the Florida Straits. There were frequent trips to Cuba as well and hunting expeditions.

And Hemingway grew to be popular with the locals in Key West, even organizing boxing matches in the yard of his Spanish Colonial home.

In 1932, Hemingway published "Death in the Afternoon," his first nonfiction book, detailing one of his infatuations: bullfighting.

In 1933, he fulfilled a lifelong dream when he and wife Pauline went on an African hunting safari, bagging lion and other large game. It was a gift from Pauline's uncle, and it would lead to many stories, including perhaps Hemingway's best short story, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro."

In 1935, Hemingway recounted his safari experience in "The Green Hills of Africa," adding to his legend as a writer-adventurer.

In 1937, Hemingway traveled to Spain as a correspondent. The country was divided by civil war, and Hemingway's reporting was well-received in the States. To some, he was the celebrity reporter, the veteran of war, the adventurer seeking out the next thrill.

Hemingway had company on his trip to Spain: a new love. Her name was Martha Gellhorn, a reporter he met in 1936 in Key West. Hemingway divorced Pauline in 1940, married Martha and moved to a house on a large tract of land in San Francisco de Paula, Cuba.

Also in 1940, Hemingway published "For Whom the Bell Tolls." A tremendous success in a world falling into World War II, the story focuses on the Spanish Civil War and an American fighting for the country he has grown to love.

Hemingway was caught up in the patriotic fervor after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. From his home in Cuba, according to reports and various Hemingway legends, he used his fishing boat, Pilar, to patrol the waters for German subs.

As the war raged on, he went to Europe to cover it (Gellhorn was already there, some say upstaging Hemingway). By 1945, as the war ended, Hemingway and Gellhorn divorced. And once again, Hemingway was in love, this time with Mary Welsh, a feature writer for Time whom he met during the war.

They married in 1946; in the end, she would be the wife who stayed with him the longest, until his death in 1961.

But at the end of the war, Hemingway's latest adventure was over. He returned to Cuba (when not traveling elsewhere), getting back to the craft that made him famous.

"Because he wrote in the morning and did adventurous things in the afternoons, he was great fodder for magazine covers," says Nagel. "But remember most of his life was dedicated to careful ponderous writing. But no magazine ever ran a photograph of Hemingway sitting at his desk with a pencil in hand, revising his story. The archetypal portrait of Hemingway is a guy with a rifle, standing on top of a dead rhinoceros, or next to a marlin hanging from a scale.

"We associate him with masculine adventurous activity because that's what made good cover for magazines."

But Hemingway's greatest success in letters was still on the horizon.

The fall: 1946-1961

Hemingway's fourth marriage, like the others, had its share of problems. According to accounts, the couple argued constantly, and Hemingway's wandering ways apparently never ceased.

As the 1950s approached, Hemingway's fiction was suffering criticism, too.

"There was some thought that Hemingway's career had exhausted itself and it was pretty much over," says Nagel.

That, it turned out, was far from the case. Hemingway, living in Cuba, was at work on an encompassing novel about the sea. Nagel says when he sent it Scribner's, they sent it back claiming it was unpublishable.

But they did like the last part, a story about an old Cuban man and his battle with a monster marlin.

When it was published as a novella, "The Old Man and the Sea" became an instant success, topping the best-seller list, and some critics called it a classic. It was also the ultimate exhibition of Hemingway's writing -- sparse, subtle, streamlined prose resonating with power.

"The Old Man and the Sea" won the Pulitzer Prize in 1952. In 1954, Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. It was the high point of Hemingway's writing career, ensuring his legacy for generations to come.

"I think he would not be the celebrity he is still today were it not for 'The Old Man and the Sea' and the two prizes," says Nagel.

But Hemingway was unable to attend the official Nobel ceremony, as he was still recovering from an event that some say began his downward spiral to death seven years later.

While on safari in Africa in 1954, Hemingway and wife Mary were involved in a plane crash in the African bush. Suffering injuries that weren't life-threatening, the group eventually managed to call another plane. But after picking up Hemingway and company, the second plane crashed on takeoff.

The news couldn't have been worse -- papers around the world reported that Hemingway had been killed. Hemingway, who seemed to have been obsessed with death in his prose, had found it in life.

Of course, the news was incorrect. Everyone survived the crash. Mary suffered broken ribs, and among Hemingway's many injuries, "he lost virtually all kidney function for the rest of his life," says Nagel. "Because of the loss of kidney function, he got high blood pressure. He was given a drug for high blood pressure that has depression as a side effect."

Toward the end of the 1950s, it was apparent to many who visited the legendary writer that he was reaching a crisis point -- he was described as withdrawn and moody, at times suffering from delusions. Numerous theories were developed, and are still maintained.

One centers on the idea that Hemingway was upset because he could no longer write well. Another claims, as Nagel says, that he was "depressed because he saw the black emptiness of human existence, or something philosophical."

Nagel says the blood pressure medication, combined with the shock treatments that Hemingway underwent for his depression, may have been partially responsible for his mood swings.

Beginning in 1960, "they gave him 36 shock treatments at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and shock treatments back then were very severe," Nagel says. "They caused serious memory loss in Hemingway. If there's anything a writer can't stand, it's the loss of memory. After some of those shock treatments, he didn't even know his name. Then he would be sent back home to recover, given that drug for high blood pressure, and it was only a matter of weeks before he was depressed again."

The slow decline was evident in Hemingway's physical condition -- he had dropped in weight to 160 pounds from the 200-plus pounds he weighed in his prime, according to Nagel.

But the treatment went on, as Hemingway showed continued signs of stress.

"He would get on his knees and cry and beg his wife not to send him back for more shock treatments," Nagel says.

When he wasn't at the Mayo Clinic, Hemingway was spending time at his home in Ketchum, Idaho.

Hemingway committed suicide on July 2, 1961, a day after his 36th shock treatment. He had earlier convinced doctors that he could return home.

Hero, adventurer, father, friend, enemy, celebrity -- as Hemingway scholar Michael Reynolds sees it, Hemingway would have been none of these things if he hadn't had talent.

"By the time we've reached the centennial (of his birth) he's been reduced to generalizations and clichés," Reynolds says. "But the fiction ... if he didn't write anything, we wouldn't remember him."