Big Fish

On the Relative Popularity of Zane Grey and Ernest Hemingway

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Why does a man with such great talent continually deny his sensitivity and overprotest his masculinity? He is so virile and so vast—why does he waste his time roughhousing with playboys, trying to catch the biggest fish, to bring that fish in the fastest [...]?

—Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings on Ernest Hemingway (qtd. in Eby 94)

The rivalries between boatmen are keen and important, and they are fostered by unsportsman-like fishermen. And fishermen live among past associations; they grow to believe their performances unbeatable and they hate to see a new king crowned. This may be human, since we are creatures who want always to excel, but it is irritating to the young fishermen. As for myself, what did I care how much the swordfish weighed? He was huge, magnificent, and game to the end of that four-hour battle.

—Zane Grey, Tales of Fishes (42)

This paper was born of a fascination with the overlapping lives of two American writers who made it their business to popularize the unpopular or the not-yet-popular. When they were not writing about not-yet-popular pursuits and places, they traveled, fished, and hunted compulsively, leaving behind them long trails of publicity photographs. With the rise of the internet, hundreds of photographs of Grey and Hemingway with their trophies—big fish, rhinos, lions, bulls, bullfighters, and natural wonders—were uploaded onto fanpages and archive websites. Zane Grey (1872–1939) and Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961) frequented some of the same fishing resorts, including Key West and Bimini, and while they never met, biographical sources on Gray make references to Hemingway, who is said to have so admired Grey’s non-fiction book Tales of Fishes that he bought several copies to give to friends. On hearing this, Grey wrote to Hemingway, inviting him on a round-the-world fishing trip. Hemingway declined—perhaps fearing that prolonged association with the aging pulp fiction writer might damage his reputation (cf. May 149).
While Hemingway requires no biographical introductions, few contemporary readers of American literature know that Grey was once the most revered writer of late-Romantic Westerns. At the height of his career, in the 1910s and '20s, he took millions of Americans on vicarious trips to the Southwest, and many of his novels are still in print. One might assume that his choice of the Western genre guaranteed popularity. Yet, there was nothing inevitable about Grey's rise to fame. Trained as a dentist, he should have spent his life filling teeth. To relieve the boredom of dentistry, he began writing fiction based on his family's pioneering days in eighteenth-century Ohio, and then moved on to stories of adventure set in the Southwest. But initially his choice of setting did not guarantee a wide audience. As cultural studies scholar Lee Clark Mitchell observes (and it is an electrifying observation), in the nineteenth century, when Grey was growing up, most Americans had little interest in what was going on in the West and no intention of ever going there (cf. 5). The cowboy was not yet a national icon. It was President Theodore Roosevelt and Owen Wister who valorized the West by writing about their ranching life for select audiences; it was Grey who fictionalized it for millions.

Meanwhile, Ernest Hemingway, a Modernist who expressed deep contempt for popularity, gradually won both critical and popular acclaim, to eventually become a 'classic' in the American canon. On the surface, then, it would seem that Grey and Hemingway are a perfect illustration of the two-tier system described by Pierre Bourdieu: the literary field sustains two economic structures, one that produces 'bestsellers', the other 'classics'. Large publishing houses with a rapid turnover and large print runs tend to invest in 'bestsellers'; smaller houses use 'talent-spotters' who are able to 'sense the laws of a market yet to come'. In a cultural climate in which 'success is suspect', such small publishers invest in little-known authors and groom them, with the help of reviewers and literary critics, to become 'classics', thus earning a long-term profit on their (ostensibly) throwaway investment (cf. Bourdieu 101). Thus, the very features that potentially make a book popular in one period (such as the right proportion of the familiar to the unfamiliar in an easily recognizable genre) may make it unpopular in another, or else popular with a different group (for instance, novels originally written for adults sometimes slide into the category of juvenile fiction). Conversely, books that usher in new genres, elude generic categorization, or challenge the broad reading public's sense of decorum, sometimes manage to interpellate a new reading public, which builds its distinction around a preference for the unpopular. Eventually, with the right institutional backing, some originally unpopular books
enter national canons and are read by generations of high-school and university students.

But the case of Grey and Hemingway is not as clear-cut as Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of ‘bestsellers’ and ‘classics’ would suggest. It is worth discussing these two writers together because their works and careers raise questions about the criterion of ‘popularity’ used to sort writers into boxes, and about the cachet attached to ‘unpopularity’. In addition to thinking about (un)popularity in terms of the book marketplace, this paper will explore the thematic continuities in the work of Grey and Hemingway to question some of the distinctions made between popular and highbrow subjects and forms. What I see is an economy of the popular/unpopular, a continuous flow between these elusive categories. It is not that I want to reclaim Grey as an unrecognized ‘classic’; the formulaic character of most of his fiction does not permit such a repositioning. What I would like to show is that, writing in more or less the same period, Grey and Hemingway consistently traded in the not-yet-popular, which was often synonymous with the exotic; that they used similar strategies of controlling their public image to boost book sales; and that they were both read by millions, though perhaps not the same millions. These two Americans of respectable small-town middle-class background (Grey, the son of an Ohio dentist; Hemingway, the son of an Illinois doctor) both managed to write themselves out of the middle class by being popular with the middle class. Drawing on Robert W. Trogdon’s 2007 study of Hemingway’s lifelong relations with Scribners, I will try to show how Hemingway negotiated the problem of ‘popularity’, endlessly vacillating between desire and fear of popular recognition. As there is no comparable archival study of Zane Grey’s relations with his publisher, Harper and Brothers, I will draw on biographical sources to show how he dealt with the waxing and waning of his own popularity.

The Book Marketplace and Changing Readerships

Stuart Hall and Elizabeth Traube single out the early decades of the twentieth century, when Grey and Hemingway made their careers, as a period of technological and social transformations that reorganized popular culture. ‘Local entrepreneurs who catered to class-specific urban markets gave way to oligopolistic corporations producing for national markets’ (Stansell and Peiss qtd. in Traube 140). In the nineteenth century, print runs had been relatively small in comparison with those in the 1910s and ’20s. Grey’s books
were among the first to sell in hundreds of thousands. Even Hemingway’s avant-garde Modernist novels sold in tens of thousands.

Grey and Hemingway were both read by crossover audiences: Grey by middle- and low-brow audiences, Hemingway by middle- and high-brow audiences. Within their lifetime, a rift began to form within the middle-brow readership: some continued to embrace the traditional ‘producer ethic based on work and self-denial’, while others were attracted to the ‘emergent ethic of consumption’ and ‘a new promise of sensory excitement, sexual expressiveness, and emotional release’ (Traube 140–41). Grey and Hemingway clearly espoused the ethic of consumption. Posing for publicity photographs, they modeled a lifestyle for their fans, as did their literary characters. If those characters chose to live modestly—even ascetically—they did so in exciting, faraway places. The large print runs made possible by the new publishing industry meant generous royalties that gave both men the freedom to travel and write about places inaccessible to most of their contemporaries. Grey was one of the earliest tourists in the American Southwest; by writing about this region, he was able to tap into urban Americans’ longing for wide-open spaces. Rather than cash in on a pre-existing fad, he created the fad himself, and when masses of tourists following in his footsteps trampled his beloved natural wonders, he sought new pastures. Likewise, Hemingway drew his readers toward exotic places, from the Left Bank in Paris, through rural Spain and East Africa, to Cuba and the Florida Keys.

Both writers offered sensory excitement but learned to temper their imagination so as to maintain the middlebrow readership. For Grey this meant completely suppressing his interest in sex. As critic Jane Tompkins pointed out, Grey powerfully projected the erotic onto the Western landscapes—a skill that elevates him above the average pulp writer: Writing in the more sexually liberated post-First World War times, Hemingway frequently explored heterosexual relations but had to avoid overt depictions of the erotic and to suppress his interest in the non-heterosexual.

Like cultural change anywhere, the developments in the US of the early twentieth-century meant that ‘some cultural forms [were] driven out of the center of popular life [...] so that something else [could] take their place’ (Hall 443). Grey’s romances, styled on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s and Robert Louis Stevenson’s, were increasingly pushed out of the center to be read mainly by immigrants and young adults. Meanwhile, middle-brow readers acquired a taste for Hemingway’s ascetic style and innuendos, embracing him as the voice of a generation. But this cultural process did not happen spontaneously. By examining Hemingway’s writings we can observe how
Hemingway actively pushed older, less modern writers out of the center to make room for ‘the new’.

The Western Legacy

Both Grey and Hemingway can be viewed as heirs to the rancher-turned-president, Theodore Roosevelt\(^8\) and to Owen Wister\(^9\) who elevated the Western from pulp to classic in *The Virginian*. Aligning themselves with Roosevelt and Wister, Grey and Hemingway built their careers on an ethos Jane Tompkins identified (with reference to Grey) as ‘being, acting, and writing [which] formed a perfect continuum’ (163). Grey met his frontier hero Charles Jesse ‘Buffalo’ Jones at a lecture in New York and followed him out to Arizona. It was to Jones and the Mormon rancher Jim Emmett that he owed his first heady experience of pioneering in the desert, fictionalized in *The Last of the Plainsmen* (cf. May 48-52). Henceforth, Grey would spend part of each year in the Southwest, hunting, trekking, and keeping notes that would later be transformed into fiction or articles for men’s magazines.

Hemingway, in turn, was a belated cowboy who spent long periods on ‘dude ranches’ in Wyoming and Idaho. Few of his aficionados, however, are aware of these episodes because he wrote so little about them. Why he chose not to do so can be explained by the fact that by the 1930s pulp writers and Hollywood studios had thoroughly exploited the old frontier states. The logic of tourist and literary consumption drove Hemingway to seek other frontiers in Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean, even though he sometimes retreated to the West to write (for instance during the Great Depression).\(^{10}\)

The Masculine Code

Arguably, one of the sources of Grey’s and Hemingway’s popularity, particularly with male readers, was the fact that they were heirs to the ‘Code of the West’ popularized by Wister’s *The Virginian*. The eponymous narrator travels from the East Coast to a Wyoming Ranch, where he gradually learns the code by observing the modest, laconic, stoical Virginian. He sketches scenes that illustrate the Virginian’s protective attitude toward women and all weaker beings (including the narrator and an eccentric old hen) and the Virginian’s sense of responsibility for the local community. At times, being responsible means taking the law into his own hands. Like the Virginian, Wetzel in *Betty Zane*, Hare in *Heritage of the Desert*, and Lassiter in *Riders*
of the Purple Sage do not shirk from lynching cattle thieves, kidnappers, despot s, and bad Indians. Grey took over the masculine code wholesale, creating a series of male characters who risk their lives to protect women’s honor, expecting nothing in return, not even love.

In line with Roosevelt and Wister, Grey believed the Frontier to be crucial for hardening white men in body and spirit. According to eugenicists, as a result of ‘overcivilization’, the white race could lose its dominant position in the United States and in the world.11 Whites were the only race capable of bringing progress and making full use of the continent’s natural resources. As critics Richard Slotkin and Lee Clark Mitchell have argued, the widespread anxiety over the condition of white masculinity was associated with economic and cultural change. The industrial revolution had pressed the small farmers and entrepreneurs into factories and offices, where obedience and productivity was valued higher than individualism and resourcefulness. The Civil War and the First World War had stripped many men of the faith in righteous, heroic struggle. Rightly assuming that American male factory and office workers longed to identify with heroes who were their own antithesis, Grey created many hypermasculine protagonists who had the freedom to ride, track and shoot game, herd cattle across wide open spaces, and dispense justice. Yet, Grey was just as interested in disoriented, indecisive men weakened by illness. For instance, the Easterner Hare in Heritage of the Desert learns ranching and survival skills in the uplands of Utah, but he often hesitates to use arms, and spends days in hiding, outnumbered by thugs, and unable to make a heroic gesture. Critic Alf F. Wallee goes so far as to say that the gradual domination of society over the individualistic hero is what distinguishes Grey’s heroes from Wister’s Virginian.

Hemingway’s indebtedness to nineteenth-century models of masculinity is less apparent,12 but the fact that he jeered at heroic codes in his fiction should not blind us to the centrality of heroism in his fiction and to his insistence on developing codes of conduct better suited to life in the shadow of modern warfare. Equipped with a personal code of conduct, Hemingway’s heroes maintain dignity in a world where all authorities, human and divine, have failed. In the face of chaos and suffering they adopt a stoical stance. While they have few opportunities to mete out justice, they care about it profoundly. To allow the reader to observe how the personal code works, Hemingway juxtaposes his heroes with antiheroes who lack the inner compass and rely on second-hand codes. As a self-conscious modernist, Hemingway rejected idealism, but he continued to valorize some of the key themes of Romantic literature, including masculinity, death, and nature. Like the frontier mythmakers, he insisted on nature’s regenerative powers.13
It may well have been the presence of these themes that led Owen Wister to take an interest in Hemingway’s career and to put in a good word for him at Scribners (cf. Trogdon 74–75).

The Trouble with Femininity

Inflating the value of masculinity inevitably leads to the devaluation of femininity. Grey and Hemingway were both traditionalists, in the sense that they assumed only men are bound by hero code. Female characters (for instance, Grey’s Jane Withersteen or Hemingway’s Brett Ashley) may develop a code of their own, but they are usually too weak and emotional to stick to its rules.

Within Grey’s and Hemingway’s lifetime, the social position of white American women changed drastically. Large numbers of women began earning a living, first as factory and office workers, then, with greater access to education, in the better-paid professions. They began to show their ankles, practice sports, sue for divorce and, after 1920, to vote. With the increased migrations of rural populations to cities at the end of the nineteenth century, and the rise of rooming-house districts where men and women lived in rented apartments, far from the inquisitive gaze of families and neighbors, sexual norms grew less restrictive (cf. Meyerowitz 92–115). The female characters in Grey’s and Hemingway’s fiction—fiancées, shepherdesses, ranchers, nurses, and guerilla fighters—shared many features with the New Woman who no longer needed to be the ‘angel in the house’ to be admired. Though Grey liked to dress his New Woman in period costumes, she was arguably far more liberated and powerful than Hemingway’s New Woman who revealed her ankles, drank, and smoked. In fact, Grey devoted an entire novel, *The Light of the Western Stars* (1913), to a New Woman. Madeline Hammond, who comes to New Mexico from the East to recover and rebuild her life, becomes a successful businesswoman, and it is she who plays the role of rescuer in the novel: she crosses the Mexican border on horseback to save an American kidnapped by revolutionaries.

But healthy, active, and often financially independent though such fictional characters might be, most of them depend on male protection. Grey’s androgynous Bess in *Riders of the Purple Sage* belongs to a band of horse rustlers and is known in town as the Masked Rider who can outride anyone. But when wounded in a scuffle, she becomes passive, completely dependent on the male protagonist, puts on weight, and starts looking like a woman. Hemingway’s Brett Ashley undergoes a similar, though less
obvious, transformation. Whereas initially she goes wherever she wants and is sexually adventurous, at the end of *The Sun Also Rises* she calls on the narrator to come to her rescue, acting the part of the traditional damsel in distress. In this respect, Hemingway’s paradigmatic Modernist novel is as traditional as most of Grey’s romances—a fact that may have contributed to its readability.

**Nature as Asylum**

Yet another popular theme that runs through the work of Grey and Hemingway is the turn away from middle-class urban America toward the bosom of nature. Grey sought adventure in the Southwest, sublime landscapes, big game, and big fish. For Hemingway it was adventure at war, at Spanish village fiestas, in Kenyan savannahs, and on deep-sea fishing trips. In fact, he immersed himself in premodern worlds so obsessively that Saul Bellows made him the object of a burlesque, *Henderson the Rain King* (1959).

Since the turn of the nineteenth century, immersion in nature and the cultivation of primitive savagery in young boys had been advocated by American physicians as remedies for ‘overcivilization’, ‘effeminacy’, and ‘neurasthenia’ to which white middle-class men were supposedly succumbing (cf. Bederman 77–120). Such views gave rise to the scouting movement, of which Grey was a lifelong member and propagator. In his fiction, nature has regenerative power: it heals the sick and disheartened, gives shelter, disciplines the body, builds up the spirit, and, no less importantly, delights the eye. Grey’s protagonists immerse themselves in nature time and again. Perhaps the most idyllic natural asylum in Grey’s prose is Surprise Valley in *Riders of the Purple Sage*, which is only accessible through Deception Pass, overhung by the Balancing Rock. One of the protagonists comes across Surprise Valley by accident, and when he first takes a look around,

Rabbits scampered before him, and the beautiful Valley quail, as purple in color as the sage on the uplands, ran fleetly along the ground into the forest. It was pleasant under the trees, in the gold-flecked shade, with the whistle of quail and twittering of birds everywhere. (89)

There is a rambling brook, a spacious cave, and plenty of food. The cave is conveniently equipped with clay utensils—relics of an extinct Indian tribe. Surprise Valley gives shelter to two pairs of lovers in succession. It heals their wounds and erases painful memories. For the first couple it is a
temporary asylum, but for the second it is the final destination: Balancing Rock collapses and ‘the outlet to Deception Pass closed forever’ (238).¹⁴

Likewise, Hemingway as a boy was an amateur scout. He wrote memoirs of trips to the Illinois woods and Indian villages with his father, and in childhood photographs he is the splitting image of Huckleberry Finn, complete with dungarees, a straw hat, and a fish dangling from his hand. We know that his romantic view of nature was severely shaken by the Second World War experience as well as naturalist philosophy, for nature in his fiction is usually indifferent to human dramas. Yet, Hemingway continued to treasure rituals associated with nature, and the longing for its regenerative power kept surfacing in his work—perhaps most forcefully in *The Sun Also Rises*. There, two American men experience the soothing power of a Spanish forest and a stream teeming with fish. The shade of the trees protects the anglers from the midday sun; the stream cools their bodies and their wine bottles; overhanging the stream are ferns ideal for wrapping the fish they catch. ‘We stayed five days at Burguete and had good fishing. The nights were cold and the days were hot, and there was always a breeze even in the heat of the day. It was hot enough so that it felt good to wade in a cold stream, and the sun dried you when you came out and sat on the bank’ (125). The men cannot stay in this idyllic spot forever—they must return to their work and irresolvable conflicts—but they can always return to the stream in Burguete: the narrator has been there before, and no falling rock will bar access to it. Nature as asylum, nature as a regenerative force—such themes had been present in American literature since their introduction by the Transcendentalists. Tapping into these time-tried themes, both Grey and Hemingway appealed to a broad American readership.

**Books as Commodities**

Nothing could be further from the marketplace and base financial concerns than the ideal of living the ‘strenuous’ rather than the ‘good life’¹⁵ and retreating from time to time into premodern worlds. Yet, the books that convey these themes are commodities which transform aesthetic pleasure into capital. Hemingway’s posthumously published novel *Islands in the Stream* (1970) includes a humorous conversation about art that takes place in the Bahamas between a white painter and a black barman. What the black man has trouble understanding is how the white man manages to make a comfortable living by painting scenes from the everyday life of poor people like himself.
‘You sell those pictures you paint all the time?’ [asks the barman]
‘They sell pretty good now’. [the painter replies]
‘Sure they buy them. Once a year you have a show in New York and they sell them’. (16–17)

Note that the painter in this passage feigns lack of agency in the process of marketing his own work. He suggests that it becomes popular spontaneously. The barman asks, ‘You sell those pictures you paint all the time? […] They really buy them?’ obviously suggesting that such paintings would not sell in the Bahamas. To this the painter responds: ‘you have a show’ (instead of I have a show) and ‘they sell them’ instead of ‘I sell them’. I find this pronoun substitution telling, because it divorces art from the business of selling art. It also absolves the artist of any suspicion that he might be knowingly exploiting the exotic potential of the Bahamas. Yet, the fictional artist's choice of subjects is guided by the awareness of what is popular among some segments of New York society, as were Hemingway’s choices.

Hemingway’s literary settings are clearly the result of his search for not-yet-popular literary terrains whose symbolic value was as yet undetermined. Spain was one such terrain. Encouraged by Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas to attend a bullfight, Hemingway traveled there. He subsequently spent years collecting insider knowledge about this spectator sport and writing a non-fiction book expressly designed to popularize something that for most Americans was an unfamiliar (and repulsive) subject.

To say that books about bullfighting in Spain or deep-sea fishing in the Caribbean were popular during Hemingway’s lifetime is, of course, an overstatement, since Scribner’s sold a total of just 20,780 copies of Hemingway’s non-fiction book about bullfighting, Death in the Afternoon, and 133,650 copies of The Old Man and the Sea. Nonetheless people in the United States did pay a great deal of money for ‘pictures of Uncle Edward’ (or someone very much like him—old Santiago in The Old Man and the Sea).

Unlike the artist in Islands in the Stream, though, Hemingway took an active interest in the marketing of all his work, badgering his publisher to spend more money on advertising, making sure his novels were serialized in prestigious magazines, and collecting far more review clippings from the syndicated press than Scribners did in their archive. For instance, in a letter to his editor, Hemingway wrote: ‘What about running a few chapters
from Death in the Afternoon [in Scribner’s Magazine] just before it comes out—Do you think that would be good for it. The book I mean?” (qtd. in Trogdon 106). Such requests pepper his correspondence with Scribners, as do complaints that not enough money was being spent on publicity,16 even though the publisher’s advertising budget for some novels approximated his earnings (and, in the case of For Whom the Bell Tolls, exceeded $40,000 [cf. Trogdon 260]).

The Unbearable Lightness of Popularity

Grey’s attitude to popularity can be described as ambivalent. There is no question that he sought it, writing the kinds of books that would appeal to the broadest possible readership. The following figures reported by biographer Stephen J. May reflect the measure of Grey’s popular success: 27 million copies of his books were sold in his lifetime; after his death, as late as 1991, his novels were still selling at the rate of 500,000 per year; at the height of his career Grey earned between $50,000 and $80,000 per serialized novel (in times when the dollar was worth more than ten times what it is today); nine of his novels made the bestseller list—the highest score of any writer before 1950 (May 149–51). Yet, his unpopularity with reviewers and critics caused him anguish, for he never abandoned the hope of becoming a great American author, remaining oblivious to the shifting distinction between middlebrow and highbrow literature, which followed aesthetic and philosophical rifts. Book reviews—which became increasingly disparaging as Grey’s fiction grew more formulaic—plunged him into depressions. But his career was brilliantly managed by his wife Lina Grey, who financed the publication of his first novels and, after 1910, negotiated lucrative contracts with book and magazine publishers. This left Grey free to do what he enjoyed most: traveling, hunting, fishing, and writing.

Hemingway had to work much longer to become a household name in the United States, and while he scoffed at those more popular than himself, there is ample evidence that he longed for recognition. Early on, Hemingway’s talent was acknowledged and fostered by fellow writers such as Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Owen Wister, and Harold Loeb. It was Fitzgerald who helped Hemingway secure his first contract with Scribners. For over two decades, Hemingway had his personal liaison and editor at Scribners, Maxwell Perkins, who cosseted and cajoled him into producing work that broke novelistic conventions yet was accessible to a
broad readership. But until the public got used to Hemingway’s style, he remained a promising minor author.

The fact that he came to be known as a novelist rather than a short-story or non-fiction writer can be seen as a by-product of trying to secure popularity. Short fiction was his forte, but his first publisher, Liveright, and then Scribners pressured him to write novels in order to make his name, and then to remain popular (cf. Trogdon 19, 157). Scribners used his short stories strategically, placing them in *Scribner’s Magazine* and elsewhere, as a way to keep his name in the reading public’s mind during the long periods when he was unable to produce a novel. He found writing long fiction grueling and often asked for extended deadlines. When writing long fiction, his aesthetic judgment—unerring in the case of short stories—often failed him.

In correspondence with Perkins, Hemingway explained his understanding of popularity: ‘you can’t be popular all the time unless you make a career of it like Mr. Galsworthy, etc. I will survive this unpopularity and with one more good book of stories (only these are going to be with plenty of action so they can understand them) and one good novel you are in a place where they will have to come around and eat shit again’ (qtd. in Trogdon 160). This passage suggests Hemingway was aware that some readers were baffled by his more experimental stories, so when sequencing short stories he alternated the more straightforward writing with the more opaque stories in which meaning is compressed between the lines. In correspondence with Perkins he explained: ‘If you want to make a living out of it, in addition every so often, without faking, cheating […] you have to give them something they understand and that has a story—not a plot—just a story they can follow instead of simply feel, the way most of the stories are’; ‘I know the book needs one more simple story of action to balance some of the difficult stories it contains’ (qtd. in Trogdon 6). What we see here is Hemingway knowingly balancing popular and unpopular.

More ideas about popularity were occasioned by the planned release of *The Green Hills of Africa*. About this novel Hemingway write to Perkins:

> It may be what people want to read. […] I believe it should sell better than 20,000 [it actually sold 12,532]—Winner Take Nothing had not one element of popularity and everything to make it unpopular. This book has so many elements that should make people like it—it has a long and good story […] plenty of story interest, suspense, and conversation, and it takes people bodily into a place where they have never been and most of them can never go. (qtd. in Trogdon 155)
Courting popularity, Hemingway nonetheless professed contempt for the market reader, whom he sometimes imagined as a female member of the Book-of-the-Month Club. To please such clubwomen, he argued, publishers try to censor his prose: ‘[I] will not have any pressure brought to bear to make me emasculate a book to make anyone seven thousand dollars’ (qtd. in Trogdon 109). Elsewhere he wrote: ‘I’m the guy who’s been the worse emasculated of any in publishing’ (qtd. in Trogdon 116). As evidence, he collected cases when his competitors got away with the use of swearwords.17 But he also made part-conciliatory part-provocative gestures toward the obnoxious clubwoman, even putting her into one of his books. *Death in the Afternoon*, a whimsical guidebook to bullfighting in Spain, is repeatedly interrupted by the author’s dialogues with an imaginary lady-reader who is curious about bullfighting but somewhat resistant to its appeal, easily bored, and inclined to stereotypes. For instance, during her third appearance in the book they have the following exchange:

Now, what puzzles you, madame? What would you like explained?

Old lady: I noticed that when one of the horses was hit by the bull, sawdust came out. What explanation do you have for that, young man?

Madame, that sawdust was placed in the horse by a kindly veterinarian to fill a void created by the loss of other organs.

Old lady: Thank you, sir. You made me understand it all. But surely the horse could not permanently replace those organs with sawdust?

Madame, it is only a temporary measure, and one that no-one can approve of. (79)

Although the most obvious function of these dialogues is to distinguish this book from standard guidebooks and provide comic relief, they are a poignant record of his anxiety about his work’s reception.

Even more obsessive than his imaginary bouts with the market reader are Hemingway’s efforts to avoid the aura of popularity. For instance, to control the cultural meaning of *Death in the Afternoon*, he refused *Cosmopolitan*’s offer to serialize several chapters (cf. Trogdon 107). He also balked at the proposition that it be offered to the Book-of-the-Month club to boost sales in a stagnating Depression Era market. ‘If anyone so acts as to put themselves out as a book of the month they cannot insist in ramming the good word shit or the sound old word xxxx down the throats of a lot of clubwomen’ (qtd. in Trogdon 109). (Significantly, in 1940 Hemingway did sign a contract with the Book-of-the-Month Club to publish *For Whom the Bell Tolls* [cf. Trogdon 208–11]). Much of his correspondence with Perkins concerned the need to
eliminate/retain obscene language, particularly the words ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’. Perkins repeatedly warned that the inclusion of such words would lead to courts banning the books; Hemingway fought valiantly for each ‘fuck’ claiming that this word made his dialogues truly masculine and authentic.

Exposing himself to potential libel suits was yet another strategy for making himself unpopular. His first long piece of prose, *Torrents of Spring*, was an extended parody of Sherwood Anderson’s style. Such an exercise in self-positioning against a highly respected American author was bound to offend many. Throughout his career, Hemingway continued to shoot poisoned arrows (overtly and covertly) at his competitors. For instance, Scribners fought a veritable battle to prevent him from calling Gertrude Stein a ‘bitch’ in *The Green Hills of Africa* (cf. Trogdon 159–61). (Arguably, though, the very strategy which made Hemingway unpopular with some endeared him to others who enjoyed such irreverence.)

One of the most interesting attempts to position his art against popular literature is in the two opening chapters of *The Sun Also Rises*. Why the narrator Jake Barnes would spend two chapters gossiping about Robert Cohn, the most pathetic expatriate in Paris, only becomes clear when we interpret the novel’s opening as an exercise in self-positioning in the field of American literature and, simultaneously, in the field of morality. By devaluing Robert Cohn as a writer and a man, Jake introduces us to his own standards. He sniggers:

That winter Robert Cohn went to America with his novel and it was accepted by a fairly good publisher. […] The publishers praised his novel pretty highly and it rather went to his head. […] He had been reading W.H. Hudson. That sounds like an innocent occupation, but Cohn had read and reread The Purple Land. The Purple Land is a very sinister book if read too late in life. It recounts splendid imaginary amorous adventures of a perfect English gentleman in an intensely romantic land, the scenery of which is very well described. (8–9)

Hemingway could have easily substituted the late-Romantic novel *The Purple Land* with Zane Grey’s *The Riders of the Purple Sage*, which also abounds in ‘splendid amorous adventures’ and purple prose about ‘scenery’. Purple or popular prose serves Hemingway as the antithesis of the laconic fact-filled cables Jake sends to an American newspaper. Since Hemingway tended to link literary style with moral conduct (calling his own ‘straight’ and ‘true’), he made the fictional hack writer Robert Cohn a henpecked bore with dated chivalric notions. Thus, from the beginning of the novel
the reader is expected to trust Jake, a hard-boiled reporter with no romantic illusions.

Most people familiar with the Paris expatriate community instantly recognized in Robert Cohn a caricature of Harold Loeb, an American writer who had been supportive of Hemingway. Several years later, in *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway attacked another writer with romantic notions, Waldo Frank, whose travel narrative *Virgin Spain* had allegedly become popular through fakery and ‘bedside mysticism’ (46–47). But this was a head-on attack, unmitigated by a fictional name. It is important to understand that Hemingway was not merely being petty when he maligned fellow-writers Harold Loeb and Waldo Frank; he refused to cut the potentially libelous material because he clearly had a stake in driving out an old literary practice from ‘the center of popular life [...] so that something else [could] take [its] place’ (Hall 443). That ‘something else’ was a literature distinguished by formal innovation and a quality that would come to be known as the hipster ethos.19

**Conclusions**

The literature Hemingway attempted to drive out on his way to popular success had not always been popular. It was Zane Grey, among others, who had made it popular. Hard as is it to imagine, Harper and Brothers rejected Grey’s first three novels before he convinced them to publish his fourth, set in Utah, *Heritage of the Desert* (1910). It was billed as ‘a rushing story [...] full of action, in which men are swayed by primitive motives, facing death carelessly’ (May 64). Having made a profit once, Harper and Brothers never let Grey go. Though the sales of his books eventually dropped off, some remain in print in Dover Thrift Editions. As the audience for the romance genre shifted from the middlebrow to the lowbrow, Grey’s chances of becoming a ‘classic’ dwindled while Hemingway’s increased. Unable to reconcile his aspirations with his actual status of a popular genre writer, ridiculed by reviewers for his ‘purple prose’, the 51-year-old Grey wrote but never published ‘My Answer to the Critics’. In it, he restates his creed that a writer should ‘use his gifts toward the betterment of the world’ and ‘write of the struggle of men and women toward the light’. Rejecting the critics’ assessment of his prose he asked them to refer to the real authorities—‘your janitor, your plumber, the fireman and engineer’ (qtd. in May 134). The audience for some of Hemingway’s fiction also grew younger and less aesthetically sophisticated. A headline in the *New York Times* on 8 December 1968
read: ‘Ernest Hemingway and the pursuit of heroism: Hemingway makes an ideal hero for youth’. This headline also draws attention to the thematic continuity between Grey’s and Hemingway’s fiction; masculinity, courage, honor, and genuine risk-taking are central to both, even if Hemingway’s prose tends to emphasize ‘struggle’ over ‘light’. Thus, the overlapping careers of Grey and Hemingway show us the workings of ‘the cultural escalator’ imagined by Stuart Hall to explain how certain popular forms gradually appreciate in cultural value while others ‘cease to have cultural value and are appropriated into the popular’ (448).

Notes

1. Short fragments of this paper were previously published in an article introducing Zane Grey to Polish audiences, ‘Zane Grey’, Amerykański western literacki w XX wieku. Między historią, fantazją a ideologią, eds. Agata Preis-Smith and Marek Paryż (Warszawa: Czuły Barbarzyńca, 2013), 36–57.
2. There are 10,000 photos of Hemingway at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston and 2,000 more in Havana, Cuba.
3. Together with Grey’s record book sales, his world fishing records have fallen into oblivion. ‘The work of pioneers was jettisoned’, wrote a belated fan in 1992. ‘There is no recollection of Zane Grey’s 582-pound broadbill swordfish, his 63-pound dolphin, his 758-pound tuna, or his 1,036-pound tiger shark. But the cruelest blow of all came when the larger Pacific sailfish, whose scientific name honored Zane Grey, was lumped with the smaller Atlantic subspecies’ (Reiger 236).
4. Eventually the millions turned to Western movies which Grey was, in fact, instrumental in popularizing. He sold movie rights to Hollywood studios, and when they insisted on shooting papier-mâché landscapes, Grey moved his family to Los Angeles and set up his own film company which shot on location (May 104–10).
5. Another author who has slipped in and out of the categories of the ‘popular’ and the ‘unpopular’ is Owen Wister, whose The Virginian (1903) started out as a ‘highbrow’ version of the ‘lowbrow’ Western. Highly praised by Henry James, it gradually entered the American literary canon. As the general public grew more sophisticated, The Virginian lost its cachet. The 1987 Polish translation is stacked in the children’s section of public libraries.
6. Grey’s lifestyle often made national news, as evidenced by the following New York Times headlines: ‘Zane Grey Buys Schooner’ (21 August 1924), ‘Zane Grey Goes Fishing in Faraway Seas: Tells of Battles with Gigantic Swordfish, Tuna, and Sharks in the Blue Waters of the Pacific’ (12 July 1925); ‘Zane Grey Gets Big Fish: Lands 582-Pound Swordfish after Five-Hour Fight off California’ (1 July 1926). The press also lionized Hemingway—so much
so that Gabriel García Lorca, who had never met Hemingway but caught a
glimpse of him once, recalled: ‘I recognized him immediately, passing with
his wife Mary Welsh on the Boulevard St. Michel in Paris on a rainy spring

7. What Jane Tompkins intuited but did not know was that Grey had been
immensely interested in sex and that he did, in fact, write about his sexual
exploits, though not in print. As a public figure, Grey strictly adhered to the
Victorian moral code. That he had led a sexually liberated life only became
apparent in 2005, when his encrypted sex diaries came to light. See Thomas

8. Hemingway once disparagingly wrote to his editor, ‘I am working on a long
plan instead of trying to be popular every day like Mr. Roosevelt’ (qtd. in
Trogdon 160). Yet, we know from biographers that Hemingway lionized
Roosevelt as a huntsman and national hero. For an account of Hemingway’s
safari in Kenya, where he hired the very same guide who had worked for
Roosevelt 20 years earlier, see Reynolds (155–67). Hemingway’s grandson
corroborates this story, giving the guide’s name, Philip Percival. He also
explains that in the 1930s Hemingway ordered a ‘military version of the .30-
06 bolt-action rifle […] essentially the weapon that Teddy Roosevelt took
with him to hunt in Africa’ (Patrick Hemingway xvi–xvii).

9. Owen Wister actually supported Hemingway in the publishing business,
advising Scribner’s to serialize *A Farewell to Arms* (cf. Trogdon 74).

10. Hemingway’s annual retreats to the L-T ranch in Wyoming are discussed,
among others, by Vaill (62–65) and Hawkins (141–42).

in *Gunfighter Nation* (1992) examine white masculinity at the turn of the
nineteenth and twentieth century.

12. Masculinity in Hemingway’s prose is discussed in depth by Thomas Stry-
chacz in *Hemingway’s Theatres of Masculinity* (2003) In Ernest Hemingway:
*Machismo and Masochism* (2005), Richard Fantina confronted the feminist
accusations that Hemingway enacted the worst kind of masculinism. Most
biographers and literary scholars who have written on Hemingway since
the rise of gender studies make some reference to his fraught relation with
masculinity.

13. Hemingway’s belief in the regenerative power of nature is less apparent
than Grey’s because it is tempered by his fatalism. Yet, as Susan B. Fegel
points out, Hemingway ‘grew up in the midst of an environmentalist awak-
ening […]—the so-called back to nature movement’—a response to rapid
industrialization and the hunting frenzy that eliminated countless animal
species (239). Taught to appreciate the wilderness by his father, he sought
contact with unspoiled nature in the Spanish highlands around Burguete
(depicted in *The Sun Also Rises*), on the plains of the Serengeti (depicted in
*The Green Hills of Africa*), and, throughout his life, out at sea which ‘once
you are out of sight of land, […] is the same as it has ever been since before
men ever went out on it in boats’ (Hemingway qtd. in Fegel 241). Even if one can only enjoy brief moments of respite from modernity in natural retreats, the compulsion to do so is evident in Hemingway’s fiction and in his life.

14. Attesting to the lasting inspiration of Grey’s romantic vision of nature is the following blog http://desertspiritpress.net/2013/06/05/zane-grey-solitude-and-the-western-hero/ posted by Brad Karelius on 5 June 2013. Karelius is the pen name of an academic and Episcopalian pastor, author of The Spirit in the Desert: Pilgrimages to Sacred Sites in the Owens Valley (2009).

15. ‘The Strenuous Life’ is the title of an influential 1899 speech by Theodore Roosevelt about ideal American manhood. It was subsequently expanded into The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses (1900).

16. Trogdon gives the figures for Scribner’s advertising expenditures in Appendix 2 (260). They range from in 1926–27 $6,557.93 for The Sun Also Rises to $43,567.09 in 1940–41 for For Whom the Bell Tolls.

17. Accusations of nihilism, the use of obscene words, as well as representations of sex, debauchery, and senseless death resulted in many of Hemingway’s books being banned in Europe and the United States.

18. For example, Hemingway wrote to his editor about The Green Hills of Africa that ‘it is straight and absolutely true autobiography with no pulling of punches or lack of frankness’ (qtd. in Trogdon 155). He defended Death in the Afternoon as ‘a straight book on bullfighting’ (qtd. in Trogdon 120). More interestingly, he used similar adjectives in a description of Pedro Romero’s style of bullfighting, which can be read as an exposition on Hemingway’s aesthetic values. Romero’s style ‘was straight and pure and natural in line’ and ‘gave real emotion, because he kept the absolute purity of line in his movements’, while his competitors ‘twisted themselves like corkscrews’ and elicited ‘fake’ emotions (The Sun Also Rises 167–68).

19. According to Aleksandra Litorowicz, writers such as Ernest Hemingway, D.H. Lawrence, and Henry Miller were the direct intellectual forerunners of such hipsters as Norman Mailer (28).

**Works Cited**


