

## The Other Seven-Eighths of the Iceberg

### Peering Beneath the Surface of Ernest Hemingway's Six-Word Story

At the height of his celebrity in the 1950s, Ernest Hemingway gave a now-famous interview in which he credited the emotional power of his fiction to what he called "the principle of the iceberg."<sup>1</sup> An iceberg, he noted, floats in the Arctic with only one-eighth of its mass above water while the greater, more potentially devastating portion hides beneath the surface and attracts our concern precisely *because* it is hidden. In the same way, he reasoned, the drama of a story can attract our concern if we are allowed to glimpse only a fragment of visible action that implies an earlier, unseen experience of far greater magnitude and emotional significance. In other words, Hemingway would rarely detail a sequence of narrative events so that we may *witness* a drama, but would more often depict only the consequences of such events in a single representative scene from which we then *infer* the drama. In story after story, he effectively positions his readers as voyeurs eavesdropping on the aftermath of a dispute between two lovers, or as snoops lingering alongside some lonesome individual whose company we have entered by illicit means. He draws our attention to a dramatic scenario by carefully denying us a clear view of its causes. He concentrates our concern on the dramatic tensions that he keeps *outside* the story by meticulously foregrounding their deliberate absence.

At about the same time Hemingway gave that interview, he wrote what is easily the most radical and perhaps the most famous of his 'iceberg' stories—a story with so much detail excised that he wrote it from start to finish on one side of a paper napkin. In fact, the diminutive napkin was exactly what inspired the extreme brevity of the story. Whilst enjoying dinner with half-a-dozen close friends, Hemingway held his napkin aloft and wagered the others ten dollars apiece that it could serve as a canvas large enough to contain an entire short story. Given the sheer audacity of his proposition, his friends were more than willing to wager against him; but, less than a minute later, Hemingway settled the bet when he scribbled a story on the napkin, presented it to his audience, convinced them of his skill, and collected his just rewards. This is the story he wrote:

FOR SALE:  
BABY SHOES,  
NEVER WORN.

By any measure, those six words demonstrate the power of Hemingway's 'iceberg principle' at its heartbreaking best. On first reading, we infer that a newborn infant has died, although both its birth and its death have been absented from the text and pushed beneath the surface of the narrative. On further reflection, we infer that the death of the child has left its mother desperately impoverished and in need of financial aid, otherwise she would have no reason to advertise the sale of something as commercially worthless as a pair of baby shoes. From her prior purchase of the shoes, we then infer the joy and the nervousness she must have experienced in her anticipation of childbirth, and from this anticipation we finally infer the trauma and grief she must have experienced when her child died or arrived stillborn. Alternatively, recalling the end of Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms*,<sup>2</sup> we may infer that the *father* of the child placed the sales advertisement and that it is he who now endures the trauma of losing both his child and its mother in the birthing process. Or we may instead recall Hemingway's most celebrated short story, 'Hills Like White Elephants,'<sup>3</sup> and infer that the child's mother bought the shoes when she first learned that she was pregnant, but that the child's father has since destroyed her expectations of childbirth by pressuring her to seek an abortion.

After just a moment's contemplation, then, a handful of carefully chosen words can yield great depths of meaning and allow us to glimpse a narrative far more elaborate than what actually appears on the page. This Zen-like aspect of the story's minimalist structure is surely the source of its longevity—a longevity that, most recently, has seen the story embraced as an object of widespread public celebration and creative imitation. In late 2006, *Wired* magazine asked thirty-six world-renowned science fiction writers to follow Hemingway's lead and compose an original story using only six words. Joss Whedon, Neil Gaiman, William Gibson, and Margaret Atwood were among the industry heavyweights who rose to the challenge.<sup>4</sup> In early 2007, *The Guardian* posed the same challenge to an even more dignified array of literary stars including Booker Prize winners A. S. Byatt, Yann Martel, and DBC Pierre, as well as Pulitzer Prize winners Richard Ford and Jeffrey Eugenides alongside twenty-five others.<sup>5</sup> Later that year, the BBC extended

the challenge to its several million radio listeners by asking them to write their own six-word stories for potential publication in an anthology inspired by Hemingway,<sup>6</sup> and in January 2009 the Arts Council of England donated an impressive £27,000 to a youth engagement project that encouraged young Londoners to do likewise.<sup>7</sup> Earlier, in 2007, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Edward P. Jones attributed the story to Hemingway in a speech at that year's PEN/Hemingway Prize ceremony,<sup>8</sup> and the novelist and short story writer Robert Drewe made the same attribution shortly thereafter.<sup>9</sup> Finally, and most recently, public celebration of Hemingway's six-word story arrived on Australian shores when ABC-TV and Triple-J radio personality Marieke Hardy opened the 2009 NSW Premier's Literary Awards with a keynote address that targeted the story for particular praise.<sup>10</sup> There is, however, a problem with this continued celebration of those six words: the story behind the story is itself *only a story*, since Ernest Hemingway never actually wrote the words that these public voices now want us to cherish him for writing.

Professional researchers have reported as much. The myth busters at Snopes.com have debunked the story's attribution to Hemingway with reference to a range of alternative sources from which it might have truly originated.<sup>11</sup> Having myself recently trawled through the entirety of Hemingway's published works, including posthumously published letters and private writings, I can confirm these findings. The story behind the six-word story is, at best, apocryphal: if in fact Hemingway *did* write this story, he wrote it only for his audience at that dinner table and withheld it from the world at large. This does not at all devalue its power, of course, but it does raise the question of how exactly Hemingway came to be credited as its author in the first place. The Snopes researchers have traced the story's provenance to a fictional dinner table scene in a theatrical production based on Hemingway's life, which was reported as fact in a New York tabloid newspaper;<sup>12</sup> but still, this explanation of how the misattribution *happened* does not help us to understand how it first came to be *credible*. Before anyone actually began to believe that Hemingway wrote the six-word story, what exactly might have inclined some to believe that he was capable of, and interested in, writing such a story at all?

The answer must lie in his giving expression to the 'iceberg principle.' "I [try] to eliminate everything unnecessary to conveying experience to the reader,"<sup>13</sup> he explained in that initial interview and later elsewhere, so that "the reader... will

have a feeling of [what has been kept absent] as strongly as though the writer had stated [it]."<sup>14</sup> The six-word story pursues this principle of writing to its most logical and yet its most radical extreme, distilling Hemingway's creative theory into fewer words than he himself used to express it and putting the theory into practice at the same time. So when a story that so closely adhered to his principle somehow came to be written, there emerged a back story which held that Hemingway himself wrote it in order to demonstrate the power of his principle. The result, of course, is that a story that does not belong to Hemingway has today captured incredible public attention at the expense of the stories he *actually* wrote, and the anecdotal story of his writing it has stoked the public imagination in a way that his own exploits once did but have not done in a long time. His entire body of work, it seems, has lately become both represented and overshadowed by a story that is nowhere to be found in his pages. How ironic, and how finally tragic, that a man who relentlessly battled to express truth and to champion authenticity in his work should now find his efforts reduced to something as inauthentic as this: six words, often praised, never written.

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- <sup>1</sup> George Plimpton, 'The Art of Fiction No. 21: Ernest Hemingway' in *The Paris Review* 18 (Spring 1958 [accessed 7 November 2009]): 26. Available from [http://www.theparisreview.com/media/4825\\_HEMINGWAY4.pdf](http://www.theparisreview.com/media/4825_HEMINGWAY4.pdf).
- <sup>2</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Scribner, 1929).
- <sup>3</sup> Ernest Hemingway, 'Hills Like White Elephants' (1927) in *The First Forty-Nine Stories* (London: Arrow Books, 2004), 259-63.
- <sup>4</sup> Various authors, 'Very Short Stories' in *Wired* 14.11 (New York: Condé Nast Digital, November 2006 [accessed 7 November 2009]). Available from [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/sixwords\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/sixwords_pr.html).
- <sup>5</sup> Various authors, 'To cut a long story short' in *The Guardian Weekend* (London: Guardian News and Media Limited, 24 March 2007 [accessed 7 November 2009]). Available from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/mar/24/fiction.originalwriting>.
- <sup>6</sup> Various authors, 'Life in Six Words' in *Today Programme* (London: BBC Radio 4, 28 June 2007 [accessed 7 November 2009]). Available from [http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/print/misc/sixwordlife\\_20080205.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/print/misc/sixwordlife_20080205.shtml).
- <sup>7</sup> Anna Gorse, 'Hemingway's six word challenge inspires Sutton literature project' in *Arts Council England Press Office* (London: 9 March 2009 [accessed 7 November 2009]). Available from <http://www.sutton.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=5404>.
- <sup>8</sup> Edward P. Jones, 'PEN/Hemingway Prize Keynote Address Delivered at the John F. Kennedy Library, 1 April 2007,' *The Hemingway Review* 27.1 (May 2007): 13.
- <sup>9</sup> Robert Drewe, 'The Short Story: Amanda Lohrey, Robert Drewe, Chimamanda Adichie,' *The Monthly: Slow TV* (Sydney: May 2009 [accessed 7 November 2009]). Available from <http://www.themonthly.com.au/short-story-amanda-lohrey-robert-drewe-chimamanda-adichie-1878>.
- <sup>10</sup> Marieke Hardy, 'Lap up literature where you find it—on TV, on posters, and even in blogs' in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney: Fairfax Media Limited, 19 May 2009 [accessed 7 November 2009]). Available from <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/lap-up-literature-where-you-find-it-on-tv-on-posters-and-even-in-blogs-20090518-bcn7.html?page=-1>.
- <sup>11</sup> Barbara and David P. Mikkelson, 'Baby Shoes' in *Snopes.com: Rumor Has It* (San Fernando, California: Snopes.com, 29 October 2008 [accessed 7 November 2009]). Available from <http://www.snopes.com/language/literary/babyshoes.asp>.
- <sup>12</sup> Howard Kissel, 'Anecdotes About His Life as 'Papa'' in *Daily News* (New York: New York Daily News Limited, 6 May 1996 [accessed 7 November 2009]). Available from [http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/entertainment/1996/05/06/1996-05-06\\_anecdotes\\_about\\_his\\_life\\_as\\_.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/entertainment/1996/05/06/1996-05-06_anecdotes_about_his_life_as_.html).
- <sup>13</sup> *Op. Cit.* Plimpton, 1958.
- <sup>14</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner, 1932), 192.