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Remembering Hemingway: The Endurance of the Hemingway Myth

Lyons Siobhan
Media and Cultural Studies
Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Abstract: **Consumers of culture can often view history subjectively, perceiving people and events through an idealistic memory to satisfy their perception of 'great', heroic people. The image of American writer Ernest Hemingway was partly created by favorable media imagery and celebrity culture. With the advent of newer media technologies in the twentieth century, writers such as Hemingway, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Emile Zola and Ford Maddox Ford (often called the Lost Generation [generation perdue]) were able to carefully manipulate their audience through their writing and the Romantic image that was circulated by the public. The idealized way in which these authors were viewed is reminiscent of the period of Romanticism, when authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Lord Byron were revered as geniuses. Through films such as Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* (2011), the Hemingway Myth – in which various attributes and details about the author were exaggerated to fuel Hemingway's image – has endured well into the twenty-first century. This paper will examine the progress and transformation of the Hemingway Myth, i.e., how it contradicted the man himself. Cultural memory is especially fostered through literature and film, and Allen's film, along with the 2012 *Hemingway and Gellhorn*, not only aids this image, of Hemingway as a passionate, romantic gentleman, but it greatly embellishes it. Hemingway's own works, moreover, facilitated the romanticized manner in which he was received by his public, only later to be solidified in his appearances in various American magazines. This paper will argue that in the field of literature, celebrity authors particularly benefit from the flattering outcome of cultural memory, in which figures such as writers and artists are enamored by their public. By existing in an overwhelmingly artistic industry, it is no surprise that the memory many of these writers leave behind, to this very day, is equally artistic.**

Keywords: **Hemingway, Myth, Memory, Paris, Romanticism, Celebrity**

"Nostalgia is denial, denial of the painful present. And the name for this fallacy is Golden Age thinking: the erroneous notion that a different time period is better than the one one's living in. It's a flaw in the romantic

imagination of those people who find it difficult to cope with the present."
(Midnight in Paris, 2011)

"Each successive age has believed that heroes—great men—dwelt mostly before its own time"
(Daniel J. Boorstin, "From Hero to Celebrity", *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*)

Ours is a society much devoted to both the Romanticisation of public figures and the revering of periods in time. This is particularly true of authors, who, more so than purely mediated celebrities (the sport star, the film star, etc.), are able to be architects of their own fame and image. Yet society persists in preserving this image, regardless of whether it is, as we acknowledge, predominantly a myth. Mediated ideology persists to such an extent that the myth becomes absorbed as legend, and thus the realism behind the figures becomes distorted. This is particularly evident in the case of American author Ernest Hemingway, whose celebrity image eclipsed the man and thereby created a culturally fruitful myth. Various magazines, books and most especially films characterise Hemingway as an overtly masculine, passionate hunter and lover, an archetype that would become reiterated in the stream of popular culture that has since produced audiences and consumers of Hemingway's work and image that often naïvely assume a direct, undisputed correlation between this image and the authentic figure of Hemingway. Of course the myth surrounding Hemingway is most eagerly embraced by audiences who are familiar with the *Papa* archetype of Hemingway's later years, although he nicknamed himself Papa at the age of 27. This image is most strongly associated with Hemingway in his later life when the author had a white beard and an aged face. A.E. Hotchner's biography, *Papa Hemingway: A Personal Memoir* (1966), focuses on Hemingway's later, supposedly 'wiser' years, although the work has received criticism for Hotchner's portrayal of the author.

In 2010, a play called *Papa: The Man, the Myth, the Legend: A Tribute to Ernest Hemingway*, was filmed for a DVD release, and described Hemingway as a deeply troubled writer, yet the piece nevertheless engages with the Hemingway myth-making process as most tributes do by focusing on those aspects continuously attributed to Hemingway: his African safaris, his young Parisian years, and of course his service during World War I. In an interview published on *Papa's Planet*, a site dedicated to the 'things and places that Hemingway loved', American writer Eddy Harris describes his love of Paris through Hemingway's depiction of himself and the city:

> For an American writer living abroad, Hemingway takes on a larger-than-life quality. A male American writer then wants to imitate what Hemingway did. You can't duplicate that. It just isn't there anymore. But you still go there. It's almost like doing a pilgrimage to the Hemingway myth. I don't know if you can be an American male write[r] and not do that (cited in Frey, 2010, NP).

Harris's observation that there is a *pilgrimage* to the Hemingway myth is particularly lucrative and also quite accurate. The Hemingway myth has become absorbed throughout the literary tourism industry that seeks to elevate places where Hemingway lived, wrote, ate or visited to that of Heritage status. Of course

Hemingway is not the only author to have provoked this kind of Romantic distortion, yet he remains the most prominent example. In Paris, for example, a tourist walk named *Hemingway's Paris* attracts those travellers eager to seek out significant areas attributed to Hemingway. In this small but significant way the Hemingway myth endures due to the collective imagination of enamoured tourists. Yet it is not solely the collective imagination of Hemingway's readers that sustains the myth, as I will argue. Hemingway himself greatly participated in the construction of his public image in such a way as to illuminate his persona to the height of legend and genius. Hemingway's 1944 article in *Collier's Magazine*, titled "Voyage to Victory", was, as Lynn explains, one of the ways in which Hemingway himself perpetuated his own mythology through World War II. He writes, "World War II, it was clear, was going to be another vehicle for the Hemingway myth—and as had been the case a quarter of a century before, even the tallest of the tales that Hemingway dreamed up would be eagerly disseminated by ingenious admirers" (1987, p. 510).

Indeed, the myth-making process that Hemingway himself employed and practiced would eventually see his celebrity persona obscure the more literary side of Hemingway, in much the same way as Mark Twain eclipsed the writer behind the pseudonym, Samuel Langhorne Clemens. Cawelti writes of this myth-making process as fundamentally damaging to Hemingway, as his celebrity persona, it seemed, could not exist alongside Hemingway's role as a literary author:

> Hemingway created a public persona that was like a real-life version of one of his central characters. This figure had enormous appeal and influence and made Hemingway well-known among a much wider public than those who actually read his novels. Indeed, the Hemingway persona of "Papa" was so attractive and compelling that it eventually began to eclipse that other side of Hemingway that had also been a part of his greatest novels and stories […] It is tempting to say that in his later life, most of Hemingway's creative energy went into the creation of his celebrity persona, and that while brilliant as a public performance, this persona was insufficient to the demands of great fiction (2004, p. 57).

This image that Hemingway cultivated and perfected, by adhering to mediated representations of himself, has continued well into twenty-first century culture in various forms. The Hemingway myth and the way in which Hemingway is remembered is culturally obscured; various artistic fields favour the more romanticised version of Hemingway's persona and, moreover, exploit this image of Hemingway through films, products and literature. In 1999, the centennial of Hemingway's birth, Sharkey wrote:

> Ernest Hemingway brilliantly cultivated his elephantine public image during a 30-year reign as America's most famous writer. But the rough and cantankerous Hemingway, who committed suicide in 1961, might have a difficult time recognizing himself today in the hype over the centennial of his birth on July 21 (1999, NP).

This was not only due, as Sharkey elaborates, to the posthumous publications under Hemingway's name, but both to the imagery and prolific memorabilia that flooded various stores after the author's death. Furniture, Mont Blanc pens, clothing and a large

assortment of items are still available for Hemingway fanatics from those stores and areas that profess to offer the authentic Hemingway experience through culturally-tampered memorabilia. Despite the John Richard Collection and Thomasville Furniture, for example, featuring home-décor products in ode of Hemingway (including safari jackets, wall art, eye wear and even a Kilimanjaro bed), Sharkey, along with many other theorists including A.E. Hotchner, a close friend and biographer of Hemingway, and Kenneth Lynn, insist that Hemingway was rarely if ever associated with such things as décor, as the author was far more dishevelled and slovenly than popular theories would suggest. This is not, of course, to say that Hemingway was not a good writer or even a good man; such judgements are subjective and somewhat peripheral to this essay. Rather, the extent to which his image as a fearless hunter and impassioned, larger-than-life man has been elevated is to be contested on the grounds that it neglects facets of Hemingway's personality that would be far more intriguing and insightful in regards to his work.

On July 2, 1961, Hemingway committed suicide and the news spread incredibly quickly. John Raeburn describes Hemingway's death as the most difficult in America "since Roosevelt" (1984, p. 167). He articulates how Hemingway's presence was "such a fixed part of the emotional landscape" (167), further observing that:

> His passing did not end his hold as public writer upon the imagination of his countrymen. If anything, his public personality was more in the public eye in the eight years after his death than before. During this period, which concluded with the publication of Carlos Baker's authorized biography, he was the subject of six other biographies, scores of reminiscences, many poems and short stories, dozens of appreciations, even a syndicated comic strip which purported to tell the story of his life. And in his posthumous memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, he continued to influence the public's perception of his character, adding lustre to his already fulgent Paris years (1984, p. 167).

Death, in this instance, as it is for a great many number of famous authors, becomes a way in which to further accentuate and elevate the status of the author to that of a legend. As with Lord Byron's funeral and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's posthumous publication of his *The Confessions* (1782), the event of an author's death in turn and somewhat surprisingly serves to cement the author's image as a genius as well as conditioning a cultural memory in which their life becomes both immortalised and idealised. As Tom Mole describes in relation to Lord Byron's death, "Byron's living celebrity actually hampered any appreciation of his merit as a poet. When life and celebrity end, genius begins its immortal triumph" (2009, p. 49). This was also particularly true of Hemingway, whose death, as a result of suicide, subsequently accentuated his myth in such a way as to turn death into a crucial component in the myth-making process. Cultural memory thus requires, in part, the death of a famous figure in order to be actualised to its fullest extent of Romanticisation and idealisation. Hemingway's death thus served the author well in cementing his history as a truly great writer but also began to provoke reinterpretations of his myth due to what can be argued to be a global sense of Romantic sympathy. However, such a mythology of authorship is not solely created through the advantageous politics of death; true, such an event

does indeed elevate an author or famous figure, yet this mythology has its origins not simply in the mediated circulation of the author's image but also in the work of the author themselves. Hemingway, as with many other authors, was, as Raeburn describes, an architect of his own fame and public reputation (1984, p. 7). Part of this romanticised image much publicised in *A Moveable Feast* is Hemingway's embodiment of the struggling writer, very much a product of Romantic, bohemian literature and ideology. In a passage from *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway writes:

> There you could always go into the Luxembourg museum and all the paintings were sharpened by and clearer and more beautiful if you were belly-empty, hollow-hungry. I learned to understand Cezanne much better and to see truly how he made landscapes when I was hungry. I used to wonder if he were hungry too when he painted; but I thought possibly it was only that he had forgotten to eat. It was one of those unsound but illuminating thoughts you have when you have been sleepless or hungry. Later I thought Cezanne was probably hungry in a different way (1996, p. 69).

Contrary to this paragraph which exudes bohemian poverty, Hemingway was, in fact, quite wealthy during his travels in Paris, being paid a substantial income as a cub journalist for the Toronto Star, while his wife, Hadley Richardson, was receiving payments from the inheritance of her deceased mother. Notwithstanding, Hemingway's image as a struggling writer, which he himself invented in part, pervaded through his readership so as to create what is now popular culture's estimation, or *version*, of Ernest Hemingway. While this version may bear authentic similarities to the man himself, it is undoubtedly an idealised, and, moreover, a fetishized reflection of Hemingway, in which characteristics of the man are embellished, exaggerated or altered, and subsequently embraced by a great number of his readers. His masculinity becomes gargantuan and his aggression alleviated into an impassioned sensibility. While his works and, of course, various magazines promoted this extremity of identity and the larger-than-life persona, the subsequent films dedicated to this imagery of Hemingway facilitated this image much more successfully. Two salient films that exist on the character of Hemingway (but not exclusively), are the Philip Kaufman biopic *Hemingway and Gellhorn* (2012), and Woody Allen's colourful, romantic comedy *Midnight in Paris* (2011), part of the director's touristic oeuvre alongside *Vicky Cristina Barcelon*a, and *To Rome with Love*. *Midnight in Paris* is a *jeud' esprit* work of nostalgic admiration; Allen plays up to the phenomenon of worshipping the past by creating a protagonist that travels back through time to 1920s Paris, arguably the height of modern literary and artistic experimentation. Gil Pender (Owen Wilson) is a struggling writer obsessed with this particular time period, a theme reflected in his novel which takes place in a nostalgia shop. When he time-travels to the past he meets such illustrious figures as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Zelda Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Salvador Dali, Man Ray, Luis Buñuel, and of course, Hemingway himself. Hemingway is characteristically masculine; his speech cleverly mirrors the author's famous minimalist prose, Allen ironically inverting a cliché of the author's work to frame his persona:

> The assignment was to take the hill. There were four of us, five if you counted Vicente, but he had lost his hand

> when a grenade went off and couldn't fight as could when I first met him. And he was young and brave, and the hill was soggy from days of rain. And it sloped down toward a road and there were many German soldiers on the road. And the idea was to aim for the first group, and if our aim was true we could delay them (Allen, 2011).

Allen's film, while a playful statement on the problematic phenomenon of nostalgia, does little to alleviate the Romantic portrayal of Hemingway by adhering to formulaic depictions of the author, that are at once ironic and distinctly exaggerated. Yet it is the depiction of Hemingway in Kaufman's *Hemingway and Gellhorn* that has received the most criticism for its reliance on the more trite interpretations of Hemingway's character. In his description of Clive Owen's portrayal of Hemingway, James Wolcott writes:

> His mustache [sic], glasses, and companion cigar make him look more like a strapping Groucho Marx, one whose wisecracks are meant to inflict some harsh truth about life, the kind of truth one can only learn from war, or hunting, or boxing, or bullfighting, or between the legs of a woman who can shift the earth's tectonic plates with her hips (2012, NP).

This description aptly alludes to the much-professed imagery of Hemingway, his multifarious image that continuously adheres to standard though flawed portrayals of masculinity. Yet this practice too is often repeated, even by Hemingway scholars. As Scott Donaldson writes, Hemingway's mediated roles consisted of: "the sportsman, the tough and virile manly man, the exposer of sham, the arbiter of taste, the world traveller, the bon vivant, the insider, the stoic veteran, and finally and most important, the heroic artist" (1996, p. 11). These roles were reiterated in popular American men's magazines that played up and played along with Hemingway's role as a manly bull-fighter among other things. David Earle captures these colourful albeit flawed representations in his work *All Man!: Hemingway, 1950s Men's Magazines, and the Masculine Persona* (2009). Furthermore, discussing Hemingway as a brand, particularly regarding the author's appearance in various TIME magazines, Joe Moran writes that Hemingway, whose fame was created: 'almost exclusively by mass market magazines and who endorsed many products in his lifetime, was so often invoked in advertisements for clothes, guns and other products after his death that his family made his name a registered trademark (Moran, 1995, pp. 359-360). As with *Hemingway and Gellhorn*, the magazines featuring the author freeze Hemingway's image in time, though more effectively as they were created within a particular time frame and as a result they cement Hemingway's image as the archetype of masculinity effectively in still-images, aiding the cultural memory of Hemingway readers. Yet while many of these images are overtly sardonic and endearingly trite, Kaufman's *Hemingway and Gellhorn* along with Allen's *Midnight in Paris* suggest not simply that the Hemingway myth endures, but that it has also become a favorable archetype to re-create and reinterpret, specifically, that certain readers and creators *desire* this image. This, therefore, becomes an integral aspect in the process of myth-making and cultural memories-devising. Rather than being the result of a rejection of reality, cultural memories, such as the one created around Hemingway's character, are fuelled by a temporary alleviation of fact that makes room for and

accommodates fiction. Even in those circumstances that feature scepticism surrounding the myth, this sceptical nature is often temporarily disabled in order for readers and audiences to partake in, or to vicariously experience, the enjoyment of indulging in fantasy and myth. Seemingly, such a cultural myth can be understood as either satirical or Romantic enjoyment; after all, Western society habitually elevates the status of famous figures to geniuses, which serves only to sever the image from reality. Yet this has significant implications for the reception of an author's work, and rather than simply being a cultural distraction, the cultural memory of a certain author can in turn impede a critical reading of their work. As Moddelmog writes in her discussion of Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden*:

> Even those critics who have examined the manuscripts and provided insight into the meaning of the excised pages have failed to explore the most radical implications of Hemingway's work on this book, a failure that suggests, at least in part, the extent to which the Hemingway public image conditions what we are able to see—or say (1999, p. 59).

As well as conditioning an interpretation of Hemingway's work, his public image also *contaminates* a reader's perception of Hemingway and his fiction by ascribing a false character profile to his work. If the cultural potency of the Hemingway myth perseveres in such an extreme manner as to either absolve the author's image of his faults or even to elevate them to a status of impassioned genius, then consequently his work, to an extent, becomes liable to misunderstandings and misconceptions. Such cultural machinations can lead to textual misrepresentations where the elevation of the work's writer to a Romantic status directly obscures and distorts the interpretation of the text, by way of romanticising the text as well as its author.

Considered a form of ironic entertainment, the cultural trend of romanticising both the past and our present memory of historical figures remains an elusive and somewhat problematic practice. As previously mentioned this trend is desired for either entertainment or sentimental purposes, and is greatly fuelled by the uses of nostalgia. That nostalgia has become a marketable commodity is not a new proposition or tactic; advertising famously relies on the glorification of the past in order to ensure certain products are purchased, whether tapping into a consumer's sense of sentimentality or vanity, for instance. Appadurai describes a state of "nostalgia without memory" (1996, p. 30), indicating two distinct types of nostalgia that are further explored in *Midnight in Paris*: lived and *imagined* nostalgia, in which lived nostalgia is the result of an actual lived-experience, while imagined nostalgia refers to the desire to have lived an experience. Mitchell links the powers of nostalgia to that of cultural memory, stating:

> Nostalgia might be productive, giving voice to the desire for cultural memory to which these novels bear witness. In the last decade or two scholars working in a range of disciplines have reworked the notion of nostalgia, claiming for it a more positive and productive role in recalling the past, a project that seems important, even necessary, in a culture that multiplies historical narratives in a variety of media [...] we can understand [nostalgia] as standing in a complex relationship with both history and memory (2010, pp. 5-6).

Indeed, the process of nostalgia, and, consequently, cultural memory remains contentious and complex. Yet it is undeniable that insofar as nostalgia and cultural memory have been incorporated in the process of decorating history and historical figures, it has become an effective tool in distortion and serves to deform history. However this practice is not isolated to twenty-first century media and art. As Boorstin explains, historically we have continued to perpetuate the notion that greatness existed only in the past. He explains that "the past became the natural habitat of great men. The universal lament of aging men in all epochs, then, is that greatness has become obsolete" (1987, p. 46). Both the plot of *Midnight in Paris*, and the film itself, critically explore this phenomenon of hastily placing great men and women in the past and thereby reductively perceiving the present as a time of stagnancy in the arts and humanities. Although there are many names and definitions for this kind of nostalgia, such as the aforementioned "imagined nostalgia", Linda Hutcheon describes this state as that of "arm chair nostalgia", something that, as Del Gizzo elaborates, is a "longing for a time or place one never directly experienced" (2012, p. 4). It is therefore a nostalgia that has been created not simply through experiential loss that constructs a realistic memory but rather a nostalgia that exists as a vicarious fragment of artistic, mediated creation fuelled by dominant, popular imagery that has either been embellished or altered quite considerably. The nature of myth-making is thus revealed to be a contagious practice that grows and prospers the more it is actively pursued and the more people are willing to partake in it and indulge in the myth-making process. Such a nostalgic desire evidently helps fuel the myth that circulates around certain authors, in particular Hemingway, in which his history and life is injected with a certain amount of fictional realism in order to sate the powerful industry of nostalgia. Hemingway himself becomes as colourful as any one of his characters, what Earle has describes as "Hemingway himself as a fiction" (2009, p. 4). *Midnight in Paris* aids this fictionalisation of Hemingway in a manner that both indulges in the process of nostalgia but at the same time aims to undermine such a practice as delusional. As Del Gizzo writes:

> *Midnight in Pari*s is compelling for many reasons, but one major reason is that it offers an extended and direct treatment of Allen's powerful nostalgic tendencies and their advantages and limits in the creative process. Ultimately, the film embraces nostalgia as it debunks it, a gesture that is similar to the way he lionizes and parodies Hemingway. It is this dual approach – the mixture between nostalgia and irony, affection and parody – that is fundamental to Allen's comedic style, which pivots on an ambivalent longing to belong, and which explains why modernist figures are vital to his brand of gentle postmodernist humour (2012, p. 5).

As Del Gizzo notes, the success in Allen's film is its mixture of both affection and irony, at once acknowledging the flaws of nostalgia while at the same time revelling in it. This is not unlike the process through which cultural memory emerges. Such a process makes myth-makers carefully imaginative and inventive, both sceptical of its fanciful nature though indulgent. Del Gizzo notes that this armchair nostalgia: "also provides the space for critique. Midnight in Paris is openly critical of what in the film is called "Golden

Age Thinking," which one of the characters, the pedantic professor, Paul, describes as a 'flaw in the romantic imagination'" (2012, p. 6). Despite the manner in which Hemingway is unashamedly romanticised, in which irony and affection are dually incorporated to paint the caricature of Hemingway as popular culture knows him, the lack of historical accuracy, as del Gizzo points out, is not something that is an entirely problematic notion in regards to *Midnight in Paris*. She writes:

> Although for people dedicated to the study of Hemingway's work and life, these violations of accuracy and a recourse to a simplistic image of the author might be disconcerting, the wild popularity of the film and of the Hemingway character in particular reveals that there is a *great deal of cultural affection for that image* (2012, p. 7, my own emphasis).

Indeed, the process of myth-making particularly where Hemingway is concerned is the assumed contract set up between the artists, directors and novelists who invent these characters and images, and the audience who, despite an acknowledged scepticism that is perhaps ripe in their minds, eagerly participate in and nurture the cultural memory of certain figures, through perhaps nothing more than a habitual eagerness to engage in flagrant escapism. *Midnight in Paris* certainly exists as a statement on the problematic notions surrounding the hasty Romanticisation of famous figures, but it is nonetheless a gesture towards creating nostalgia, as is evident not only in the script but most prolifically in the cinematography that throughout is glowing and romantic in itself.

Evidently the desire of society for great men and women greatly assists in the cultural manipulations of the past and our present memory of historical figures. Regardless of whether or not Boorstin's argument surrounding cultural distortion is accurate, it does however illuminate the extent to which nostalgia and the desire for greatness and great figures has affected our cultural memorialising of famous figures whose characters have been greatly embellished as a result. Thus, the phenomenon of cultural memory where famous authors are concerned is in great part aided by the strength of nostalgic reproductions of the past. Hemingway has particularly benefited from this process by which the past is glorified and romanticised: his myth endures, whether ironically or not, through filmic mediums eager to elevate his image to the status of a genius by playing up to formulaic representation of him. In turn this creates not a faithful reproduction of his character but a creative interpretation of the author, a cultural memory that is sustained by the mutual contract set up between artistic creators and dedicated audiences and consumers, in which the myth is created, disseminated, and then absorbed, continuously fuelling the myth.

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