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**Title**

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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8n66m06f>

**Journal**

ANQ A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles Notes and Reviews, 32(4)

**ISSN**

0895-769X

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**Publication Date**

2019-10-02

**DOI**

10.1080/0895769x.2018.1550712

Peer reviewed

Commodification in Hemingway's Early Fiction

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### Commodification in Hemingway's Early Fiction

Commodification of traditional values, even morals, was a constant concern of Hemingway's.<sup>1</sup> By commodification, I mean monetizing what had been a traditional value, simply replacing what had been an internal, personal value with a cash one. We see it early in his writings in *The Sun Also Rises*, when Jake says, "Simple exchange of values. You give them money. They give you a stuffed dog (78). Hemingway decried the loss of the old verities, especially truth, loyalty, and craftsmanship, as the twentieth century in which he grew up expanded its consumer culture, leaving far behind the production culture of the previous century. Jake passes a statue of Marshall Ney (*SAR* 37), embodiment of the old virtue of loyalty, even to death, just after Brett has secretly agreed to go to San Sebastian with Cohn, betraying at least Michael, if not Jake, but the traditional qualities are being replaced. Even though Hemingway participated in the consumer culture, desiring to be paid for his writing, and even violating a contract of exclusivity to be paid twice by two different employers for the same dispatches from Turkey (see Donaldson 38 and *Letters*, Vol 4, 326, n. 11), in his fiction he laments the change.<sup>2</sup> He expands on this later in *The Sun Also Rises*: "...Exchange of values....You paid some way for everything that was any good....Either you paid by learning..., or by experience, or by taking chances, or by money" (*SAR* 152); experience and education, lengthy methods of acquiring knowledge are replaced by quick fixes: money. Jake acknowledges the change: money has replaced learning and experience; Cohn's bought guidebooks replace learning through travel and personal observation and evaluation (*SAR* 20).

Jake leaves a 50-franc note for the prostitute Georgette for the “pleasure of her company,” even though he’s already bought her dinner and not used her professional services.<sup>3</sup> For the peasants at the *feria* in Pamplona, “it was necessary that they make their shifting in values gradually....Money still had a definite value in hours worked and bushels of grain sold” (156). Hemingway describes the world moving from a culture where hard work, suffering, art, and craftsmanship count to one where money alone is the sole measure of value—and during the *feria*, hard hours of labor are discounted in the local economy.

In Pamplona, the hotelkeeper Montoya distinguishes between the two groups of bullfighters: “All the good bull-fighters stayed at Montoya’s hotel; that is, those with *aficion* stayed there. The commercial bull-fighters stayed once, perhaps, and then did not come back” (136)--“commercial” emphasizing those who fight primarily for money as opposed to those who risk their lives for the art. Later in the novel, Hemingway contrasts Romero, who has *aficion*, with Belmonte, who emerged from retirement to capitalize monetarily on his name and reputation. Belmonte “got thirty thousand pesetas and people had stayed in line all night to buy tickets to see him” (SAR 217); he selects small, manageable, short-horned bulls and can no longer perform as he once had: “the public, who wanted three times as much from Belmonte, who was sick from a fistula, as Belmonte had ever been able to give, felt defrauded...”(218). The very word “defrauded” links us to the monetary value placed on what Hemingway called an art, a tragedy, and the commodification of values, artistic and moral. Yes, Romero also fights for money, for 1000 duros apiece (SAR 189), or 5000 pesetas each; his two bulls of an afternoon are one-third of what Belmonte earns. And in contrast to Belmonte, who emerged from retirement to

burnish his image and make more money, “Romero had the greatness. He loved bull-fighting” (SAR 220). He is an artist, with his life on the line, a true craftsman, even when facing a bull with defective vision that the arena’s president will not replace: “They’ve paid for him. They don’t want to lose their money” (SAR 221).<sup>4</sup> Even in what Hemingway describes as a tragedy (218), “the only art in which the artist is in danger of death, and in which the degree of brilliance in the performance is left to the fighter’s honor” (DIA 91), commerce intrudes, like the snake in Eden.

It’s present in other people, as well. Mike Campbell is a bankrupt, financially, but as Hemingway applies the term throughout the novel, it also applies morally and behaviorally. Jake mentions style as “an important part of the ethics” (19), and Brett, who fails at loyalty and self-control, condemns Cohn, saying that “[h]e did behave very badly” (147), and also upbraids Michael, saying, “he didn’t need to be a swine” (185). As Scott Donaldson writes: “Money and its uses form the metaphor by which the moral responsibility of Jake, Bill, and Pedro Romero is measured against the carelessness [perhaps even immorality] of Brett, Mike, and Robert” (26).

Even commercially, the distinction is made. When Jake buys two *botas*, the artisan wine-bottle maker asks him what he intends to do with them:

“What are you going to do? Sell them in Bayonne?”

“No. Drink out of them.”

He slapped me on the back.

“Good man. Eight pesetas for the two. The lowest price.”

The man who was stenciling the new ones and tossing them into a pile stopped.

“It’s true,” he said. “Eight pesetas is cheap.” (160)

Because Jake values the craftsmanship and intent of the product, whether bullfighting or *bota* making, and not simply as a commercial item, he gets a favorable price; this is a fair exchange of values. At the inn in Burguete, the proprietess has raised her rates substantially in anticipation of foreign tourists and the Pamplona festival, gauging Jake and Bill. To compensate, they drink more of her rum and wine, an added benefit of their room rate, and thereby get a simple, fairer exchange of values. Jake overtips when he expects to return to a place as a way to establish favorable service on his return, exchanging money for consideration, modern exchange of values in a consumer and service culture. Notably, all of these exchanges involve money, except in the example of Ney, who ultimately gave his life for Napoleon, indicative of the extent to which money, commodification, dominated the twentieth century (as well as today), and became a subject for Hemingway’s scrutiny.

Before Hemingway had even started on *The Sun Also Rises* he wrote “The Undefeated,” the lead story in *Men without Women*, in the fall of 1924.<sup>5</sup> In the story, Manuel Garcia, just out of the hospital from a goring, begs the bullfight promoter Retana for an opportunity to get back into the arena. Initially Retana thinks of offering five hundred pesetas, ‘but when he opened his mouth it said two hundred and fifty’ (SS, 237). For Retana, as Joseph Flora says, “it’s all about money” (8). The waiters in the café where Garcia waits for the picador Zurito describe Retana as the main economic promoter of bullfighters in Madrid: “If you stand in with Retana in this town, you’re a made man....If you aren’t in with him, you might just as well go out and

shoot yourself” (SS 341). Hemingway similarly described the promoter Dominguin, who foisted Ortega on the Spanish public as the best bullfighter in Spain (*DIA* 168), despite the fact that, in Hemingway’s view, Ortega fought “without showing anything to justify his propaganda and in addition he was beginning to have spells of cowardice” (*DIA* 170).

Hemingway wrote *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) to capture what he thought had been classical bullfighting, under assault from promoters like Domiguin and a consumer culture where entertainment replaced what he considered a high art, ballet with death at the end, an emotion-arousing tragedy. It is currently, he wrote, “a decadent art in every way and like most decadent things it reaches its fullest flower at its rottenest point, which is the present” (*DIA* 68). Instead of Aristotle’s catharsis, Hemingway’s definition of the effect of bullfighting is that “the greatest emotional appeal of bullfighting is the feeling of immortality that the bullfighter feels...and that he gives to the spectators. He is performing *a work of art* and he is playing with death, bringing it closer, closer, closer to himself....He gives the feeling of his immortality, and as you watch it, it becomes yours” (*DIA* 213; my emphasis). But at present, he complains, there are “all the vulgarities which are substituted for the dangerous manoeuvres in bullfighting whenever the fighter knows that the public is ignorant enough to accept them “ (*DIA* 170-71), the consumer-culture public.

In “The Undefeated,” one of the chief vulgarities are the Charlots, named for Charlie Chaplin, the world’s most known film performer of the day. In the Charlots, two matadors, dressed like Chaplin’s tramp figure, perform tricks with the bulls before killing them, denigrating the tragedy into slapstick. At the café where Garcia sits with

his cap off, revealing the tell-tale mark of a bullfighter, a *coleta*, a pigtail pinned forward to his hair, a waiter asks him, “You in the Charlie Chaplins?” In response, “the coffee boy looked away, embarrassed” (SS 240), embarrassed in what might be the denigration of a professional bullfighter, unknown to him, being humiliated in being asked if he is part of the farcical spectacle.

Retana’s concern for money includes not only the low wage he offers Garcia, but both the bulls Garcia fights and the horses the picadors ride. Garcia will face two *novillos*, underage or overage bulls, ones which, as Retana says ““Whatever stuff they’ve got in the corrals. What the veterinaries won’t pass in the daytime” (SS 237), when they can be seen and examined in the light. Similarly the horses:

“It’s a wonder Retana wouldn’t give us enough light to see the horses by,” one picador said.

“He knows we’ll be happier if we don’t get too good a look at these skins, another picador answered.

“This thing I’m on barely keeps me off the ground,” the first picador said.”

(SS 246)

For Hernandez, Zurito, and especially Garcia, the bullfight is still an art, something to be performed with skill, dedication, and the risk of one’s life. For most of the others, especially the substitute bullfight critic, it’s a consumer spectacle (the nighttime bullfight cheaper than those in the daytime), an entertainment that competes with a date of Maxim’s and therefore not worth his professional time. In contrast, “[t]hough badly in need of money and incapacitated by previous horn wounds, Manuel

Garcia so loves his craft that he fights for a pittance....He will die, but he will not die defeated” (Donaldson 53).

“Fifty Grand,” written in 1925 and begun before *The Sun Also Rises* (Smith 125) shows in its title the cash nexus involved in the story and the world of sport it is set in. Like Garcia, boxer Jack Brennan is a skilled boxer, an artist in “the sweet science” of boxing; he is, in fact, welter-weight champion, as well as being extremely penurious and largely concerned with money throughout the story (his other concerns being his family and his self-image). He writes his wife rather than going to the expense of long-distance calls, he skimps on his tip to the training camp’s masseuse, and he quit betting on horse racing because he “lost money” (SS 303). Brennan says, “I worry about property I got up in the Bronx, I worry about property I got in Florida....I got some stocks and I worry about them” (305). When his trainer Jerry Doyle says, “You made plenty of money,” Brennan replies, “Sure, that’s what I’m after” (312). For him, the art of boxing is a means to a financial goal, rather than an end in itself.

Two gamblers accompany Brennan’s manager out to the training camp, and Brennan bets \$50,000 against himself (over \$700,000 in today’s dollars). Brennan is getting old, he’s out of shape, and he’s facing a young, ambitious challenger. As he tells Doyle, “I’m through after this fight....I got to take a beating. Why shouldn’t I make money on it? (313). Illegality aside, betting against himself elevates the financial over the craft. And even the craftsmanship is tainted. Brennan is a dirty boxer. Although Doyle says “[t]here wasn’t anybody ever boxed better than Jack” (321), part of his admiration is for Brennan’s skill at illegal tactics: “he’s getting away with a lot of stuff” (322). And neither the referee nor the audience notice. As with the Charlots in

“The Undefeated,” “it is clear that the appreciation of the art of boxing is a compromised affair for the crowd” (Flora 99).

The odds are two-to-one against Brennan, in favor of his challenger, Walcott. But the cash nexus, the need to accumulate money, influences not only Brennan but the two gamblers who took his bet. They bribe Walcott to foul Brennan and thereby lose the fight, making two-to-one on their money bet on Brennan. It is a double cross, similar to the implied one in “The Killers,” where Ole Andreson will pay with his life for double crossing gamblers, and “My Old Man,” where Butler, it is implied, did not carry out a planned loss in a race in Italy. All these works were written after the White Sox scandal of 1919, and the subsequent trial in 1921, when eight White Sox players were accused of throwing games to the Cincinnati Reds and thereby purposely losing the World Series in returns for payoffs from gamblers, their response to being underpaid. As a Chicagoan and avid baseball fan, Hemingway followed the news accounts of the loss and the trial (*Letters I*, 245-46, 293-297). The latter letter goes beyond baseball to indict boxing: “this whole box-fight game is ... crookedly and ludicrously refereed.” And in “My Old Man,” doping race horses and fixing races is known even to young Joey (SS 197-200).

To protect his bet, to save his fifty grand and even make another \$25,000 on it, Brennan forces himself to stay erect after Walcott’s low blow and then fouls Walcott, thereby losing the fight but winning his bet and assuring his retirement from the ring is financially secure. As he tells Doyle, “It’s funny how fast you can think when it means that much money” (326). Money and a determination not to lose it, not craft, are Brennan’s focus.

Throughout these early works Hemingway decried the loss of idealized virtues of loyalty, morality, and craftsmanship. Juxtaposed to them is the paragon of virtue in the arena, Pedro Romero, named for the eighteenth-century father of modern bullfighting, a mythic figure. Romero

never made any contortions, always it was straight and pure and natural in line....Romero's bull-fighting gave real emotion, because he kept the absolute purity of line in his movements....[S]ince the death of Joselito all the bull-fighters had been developing a technic that simulated the appearance of danger in order to give a fake emotional feeling, while the bull-fighter was really safe. Romero had the old thing. (SAR 171-2)

What Hemingway has dying Harry of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" think applies as well to himself: "He had seen the world change;...he had seen the subtler change and he could remember how people were at different times" (SS 66). One such change was a decided tilt, world-wide, toward a cash-oriented, consumer culture. "[A]nd it was his duty to write of it" (ibid.) It may have been necessary in the corrupt, consumer-obsessed twentieth century to invent such a superb bullfighter as Romero, based in part on Cayetano Ordóñez as he was in 1925, but Hemingway exaggerated beyond Romero's then-considerable abilities: unlike mere mortals, Romero can will himself not to be knocked out by a superior boxer. He is a true artist, risking his life, not dealing in fakery. And in him, Hemingway gets the "messianic redemption [he] wants his exemplary matador to carry,...the burden of grace under pressure and mythic signification" (Stoneback 249). Whatever his personal behavior—and D. H. Lawrence said, "Trust the art, not the artist"—in his fiction Hemingway elevates the artist over

the commercialism he saw all around him, the modern exchange of values, where old craftsmanship is replaced by mass-produced cheap models, where laying one's life on the line for one's art replaced by Charlie Chaplin clowns, and where old verities are exchanged for cash.

## NOTES

1 CF. Suzanne del Gizzo: “Hemingway criticized commodification, celebrity, and inauthentic interaction with other cultures throughout his oeuvre,” 9; also “commodification incorporates everything and everybody into the logic of exchange-value (or the value of what one pays—in terms of money)” (17).

See also Scott Donaldson: “Hemingway’s conviction that the desire for money corrupted almost everyone...” (12).

2. Hemingway, to the extent that his stories are autobiographical, was aware of his own bad behavior and captured it in his fiction. Examples are present in the inattentive husband in “Cat in the Rain,” the badgering, passive-aggressive lover in “Hills Like White Elephants,” and Harry in “Snows of Kilimanjaro,” who blames his rich wife for his own sloth and lack of dedication to craft. As F. Scott Fitzgerald said, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function,” (*The Crack-Up*, p. 69). Thus Hemingway could accurately describe what might have been his own behavior in such a light as to draw reader criticism of that behavior.

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3 Cf Leland: “To keep Georgette from proclaiming his impotence, to appear masculine outside his circle of friends, is itself a commodity for Jake Barnes. Not simply a service differently rendered, what Georgette provides is the mechanism to produce an image: her silence is part and parcel of the appearance that Jake buys” (42-3).

4 CF Donaldson: “The cancer of commercialism had infected bullfighting. Pedro Romero...is forced to face a dangerously bad bull, whose deficient eyesight can barely detect the cape, because promoters have paid for the bull and ‘don’t want to lose their money.’ But the glory of Romero is that he remains immune to the disease of commercialism” (52)—despite his

desire to be paid for risking his life and for having his art and bravery recognized—  
recognized in what is valued: money from the public, recognition and appreciation from  
*aficionados*.

- 5 Dates of the short stories come from Paul Smith: “The Undefeated,” p. 102. Date for the writing of *The Sun Also Rises*, from Baker, 152-55.

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