

On the Transcendence of Hemingway's *In Another Country* from the Perspective of Existentialism Theory

Bowei Zi

School of Foreign Languages, Nanning Normal University, Nanning, 530299, China

Abstract

In Another Country is an autobiographical short story by Ernest Hemingway, the Nobel Prize-winning writer in the United States. The novel was published in 1927. It mainly tells a story of what happened on a young American soldier during he wounded and retreated to a hospital in Milan, Italy for recuperation. The novel has distinct Hemingway-style features with the "Iceberg Principle", "Code Hero", "Grace under Pressure" and other distinctive Hemingway-style narrative techniques, meanwhile uses colloquial style throughout. Existentialism is one of the main schools of contemporary Western philosophy. Existentialism believes that although human life is full of meaninglessness, the process of searching for the meaning of life is full of meaning. The process of searching for the meaning of life, that is, the existence of life, precedes the essence of life. This is also a distinctive sign that distinguishes humans from non-humans. War is a typical theme for many writers to describe the absurdity and meaninglessness. By depicting the various absurd experiences of disabled soldiers in a foreign land, *In Another Country* fully demonstrates the characters who refuse to be defined and constantly surpass themselves, with distinct Existentialism characteristics. At the same time, it also brings courage and strength to people, which has a strong revelation significance.

Keywords

In Another Country; Hemingway; Existentialism; Transcendence.

1. Introduction

In Another Country is a short story by American Nobel Prize in Literature-winning writer Ernest Hemingway published in 1927. It tells the story of a group of disabled soldiers who were evacuated to Italy from the front line during World War I and are recovering in a hospital in Milan. Ernest Hemingway once joined the American Red Cross and served as an ambulance driver in Europe. He wounded at the Italian front line in 1918, and thus he won the Hero Medal accordingly. In the novel *In Another Country*, the protagonist - "I" goes to a hospital in Milan every afternoon for rehabilitation treatment because of being wounded in the war, and "I" was awarded a medal as well because of the performance in the war, or because "I" am an U.S. military personnel. (Hemingway, 2012) These encounters, locations, "my" nationality and "my" identity, etc., are all similar to the experience of the author Ernest Hemingway in World War I. Therefore, *In Another Country* is an autobiographical novel. Although *In Another Country* is short in length, it is a rare masterpiece with distinct characteristics of Hemingway's style, which fully demonstrates Hemingway's exquisite literary skills and admirable writing style. This paper aims to interpret the novel *In Another Country* by Existentialism theory and explore Hemingway's construction of "Transcendence" in this novel.

2. Existentialism Philosophy and Hemingway's Existentialism

2.1. Existentialism Philosophy

Existentialism is one of the main schools of contemporary Western philosophy, and it is a philosophical irrationalism trend that explores the meaning of human existence. Existentialism is human-centered and respects human individuality and freedom. Human beings live in a meaningless universe, and human existence itself has no meaning, but human beings can shape and achieve themselves on the basis of their original existence, live a wonderful life, and thus human life become meaningful. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and Soren Aabye Kierkegaard can be seen as the forerunners of Existentialism. In the 20th century, Existentialism spread very widely and its philosophical thought continued to the humanism that emerged in the 1960s. Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus are the most representative and important figures of Existentialism philosophy. Moreover, existential philosophy has profoundly influenced literature, psychoanalysis and theology, e.g., Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky and Albert Camus in literature; Ludwig Binswanger and Rollo May in psychoanalysis; Paul Johannes Tillich in theology, etc.

Regarding existential philosophy, the most famous and explicit point of view is Jean-Paul Sartre's dictum: "Existence precedes essence". "According to Sartre, that which all existentialists have in common is the fundamental doctrine that existence precedes essence." (Copleston, 2009) What he means is that there is no innately determined morality or soul other than man himself. Morality and soul are created by man in his existence. People are not obliged to abide by certain moral standards or religious beliefs, but have the freedom to choose. When evaluating a person, it is his behavior, not his identity, that is evaluated, because the essence of a person is defined through behavior, that is, "man is the sum of his behavior". Sartre denies the existence of God or any other predefined rules. He opposes any "resistance" factor in life, because they reduce a person's freedom of choice. In the absence of these resistances, a man's only problem to be solved is which path he chooses to take. Yet man is free; even if he is deceiving himself, there is still potential and possibility. (Wikipedia, 2022)

2.2. Hemingway's Existentialism

For a long time, mainstream literary critics generally regarded Hemingway as a tough man. Either obsessed with Hemingway-esque themes and Hemingway-esque heroes, or obsessed with Hemingway's stern and concise writing style, whose colloquial writing style tends to understate great grief into simple character experiences. Whether it is the "Iceberg Principle" or "Grace under Pressure", Hemingway's "Code Hero" image is more prominent in this dimension. It is undeniable that in Hemingway's works, there is often such a heroic image: He is an ordinary man, with firm masculinity, strong judgment, wisdom, and decisive action. But it is widely believed that Hemingway was essentially a negative writer. It's hard for people to get him to say "yes". He believes that the world is dark, and his creations are mainly realistic. He believes that nothing matters and that the world is darkness. To Hemingway, people are insignificant, because they are so tiny and powerless in the face of powerful opponents (including beasts, health, fate, war, etc.). The title of his first major book: *The Sun Also Rises* is taken from the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, and emphasizes the emptiness of life itself. A passage in the book fully embodies this nihilistic doctrine: "The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hastenth to the place where he arose..." (Hemingway, 1954) This clearly reflects Hemingway's negative attitude towards life. Hemingway saw life as war and oppression. His work dramatizes this attitude to life, that life is dangerous and you can be defeated at any moment; but if you can keep your cool and stick to your principles, you can win in your own way. (Zhao, 2013)

However, if it is only based on pessimism, it is obviously difficult to be remembered and enduring by readers all over the world. The reason why Hemingway is remembered by people is because of his unyielding after suffering and disaster, his obedience to free choice, and his "Transcendence" above suffering. Hemingway overcame various difficulties through repeated choices, and finally completed the "Transcendence" again and again, which is the most enlightening philosophy that Existentialism philosophy brings to people. As Jean-Paul Sartre believed: Human life is meaningless, but it is meaningful to search for the meaning of life. (Sartre, 2014) Hemingway grew up in a wealthy family and had a wide range of hobbies, such as boxing and football. I also like to write articles. However, Hemingway refused to be defined, and completed the "Transcendence" one by one with his own practice. When Hemingway was approaching adulthood, during the First World War, he tried to enroll in the military, but was rejected by the military because of his poor eyesight due to an injury in a previous boxing match. He then actively devoted himself to the career of journalists, becoming a journalist of the Kansas Star. Later, he finally got his wish and went to the European front line of the World War I with the position of a Red Cross ambulance driver, and unfortunately, he was seriously injured in the war. Despite this, Hemingway seems to have never been defeated by life, as Hemingway once said in *The Old Man and the Sea*: "A man can be destroyed but not defeated". (Hemingway, 1995) Hemingway did not choose to surrender and give up, but went on to remain involved as a journalist in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s and World War II in the 1940s. During the war, Hemingway experienced physical trauma, as well as the psychological pain caused by the distortion of human nature. However, it is also in this process that Hemingway continuously completes the "Transcendence", which is exactly Hemingway's practice of Existentialism philosophy. As an autobiographical short story, *In Another Country* is profoundly representative.

3. Existentialism in Hemingway's Short Story *In Another Country*

3.1. Transcendence from the Title "*In Another Country*"

The title of this short story "*In Another Country*", in the form of an autobiography, summarizes Hemingway's experience to Europe in a highly concise manner, and together with thousands of American young people with passion and love, fought for the people and justice on the other side of the Atlantic, which is a very difficult and dangerous past life experience of bloodshed. In this novel, "I" not only traveled across the ocean to a hospital in Milan, northern Italy, where is thousands miles away from home, for medical treatment, but everything around "me" seems to remind that "I" am a stranger and do not belong to this place: three young men about the same age as "me" who were also injured on the battlefield and went to this hospital in Milan every day for treatment. And they are all natives of Milan, but only I am an American; Going to Café Cova for coffee, passing the hotel on the way will be scolded in Italian: "A basso gli ufficiali!" (Hemingway, 2015) Being scolded in a non-native language is obviously a unique experience in a foreign land. And this kind of language is obviously more harmful because of the background in a foreign country; Even the medals won in the war are full of Italian words of praise, such as "abnegazione" and "fratellanza" (Hemingway, 2015). All in all, all the places, events, people and language symbols around are reminding that "I" am now in a foreign land in *In Another Country*, and "I" am thousands of miles away from home, and alone. That is to say, physically, "I" am in a foreign land.

Not only that, but the mind of "me" always seems to be "in another country". Existentialist philosophy believes that the most essential difference between humans and non-humans is that human's existence precedes essence, while non-human's essence precedes existence. Ultimately, it is the human emotions, that differentiate humans from all non-human beings. And "I" am not only in a foreign land, but also feels that the soul is in a foreign land, which makes

"me" more painful and lonely, and more difficult to achieve the so-called "Transcendence" in Existentialism. Originally, as a young American, "I" went to the Italian front line for justice and the voice of the people, and was seriously injured in the war, so that "My knee did not bend and the leg dropped straight from the knee to the ankle without a calf" (Hemingway, 2015). However, the Italian people who "I" fought and even sacrificed for, yelled at "us" in the hotel where "we" went to Café Cova for coffee, claiming to overthrow "us". There is a bad location on the way to Café Cova, the streets are full of men and women, there is always singing from the small hotels on the street, and the people around don't like "us". "I" was spurned and disdained by the people, whom "I" had fought for, so "I" felt even more alien in "my" heart. Although "I" still believe that the Café girls sitting at the Cova are very patriotic, but their disdain for "me", for a young American who has fought and died for thousands of miles and almost died on the battlefield, makes "I" even more feel like "I" am in a foreign land spiritually. Despite this, even though "I" was so badly injured that "I" couldn't bend "my" knees and couldn't see "my" calf, "I" still did not give up and chose to continue fighting for justice and the people. As an autobiographical novel, "In Another Country" reflects Hemingway's experience to the Italian front line in 1918, where he was seriously wounded by a cannonball. After recovering from injury, Hemingway also participated in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s and World War II in the 1940s, etc. In the "in another country" of body and mind, the "Transcendence" has been achieved again and again. Therefore, Hemingway practiced the existential philosophy of "existence precedes essence". To paraphrase Jean-Paul Sartre's maxim, Hemingway suffered double and huge damage to his body and mind in the process of searching for the meaning of life, but acquired a great and profound meaning accordingly.

3.2. Transcendence from the Content of In Another Country

Just in the first sentence of the novel (Hemingway, 2015), Hemingway used his "Iceberg Principle" narrative technique to describe two cold and cruel images for people: autumn and war. "Autumn" was originally a defamiliar image. Due to the low temperature, people felt chilly, while the autumn in Milan was colder than average, and it was dark earlier in Milan. Meanwhile, the war was in full swing. Such simple two sentences give readers an infinite, full of cold and cruel feeling: cold autumn, dark night, cruel war. These images are just the dilemma that the protagonist "I" faces at the very beginning of the novel, and under the "iceberg", "I" am still an American youth who lives in a foreign land, and has no relatives, suffers physical and inner torture. War itself is already an extremely cruel thing, and "I" was seriously injured at this time. It can be seen that under the "iceberg", there are many things that Hemingway did not write out, but it is not difficult for people to discover, make people feel and understand those unspoken chilling subtext. At the same time, "I" was not frightened by the reality. Even if the disease was so severe that "my" calf muscles were atrophied, and the knee joint was stiff and unable to bend, let alone ordinary people walk easily. But Hemingway did not pretend to be miserable, and did not even mention the pain and torment of the body caused by trauma. He generally described the physical therapy of huge nerve pain as an exercise like riding a tricycle. At this moment, "my" knee has not yet recovered its function and cannot be bent. Therefore, using this medical machine makes the knee bend, made "me" suffers huge pain. The novel only mentions that the medical machine will be stuck every time it bends, but it does not mention the huge pain suffered by the pain nerve of the person behind every single bend. This is not only a simple "Code Heroe" image, nor is it just a simple "Iceberg Principle", it not only shows Hemingway's "Grace under Pressure", it is also a kind of "Transcendence" in the face of challenges and tribulations. There is no hesitation, no complaints. And it is an Existentialism declaration of bravely marching towards the goal.

It is not difficult to imagine that after we have analyzed the specific ailments of the hero "I" in the novel, with this inconvenient and tormented ailment, and then look back at the experience

of "we" walk to the hospital every afternoon. Its existential connotation has been excavated layer by layer and it is even more profound: although "I" received serious injuries on the battlefield, although "I" was in a foreign land, although "I" could no longer walk normally due to muscle atrophy, even though the weather was cold and darkened very early, "I" still insisted on walking a long distance every afternoon, and went to this hospital for rehabilitation treatment regularly. And "I" seems to be indifferent to "my" own illness. "I" am more concerned about that there are how many ways to go to the hospital, care about the chestnuts and the fire of a woman selling fried chestnuts, and about the structure, appearance and the history of the hospital. All of these things have obviously gone beyond the general sense of self-consciousness and entered the realm of no self. It is a typical kind of Existentialism "Transcendence".

The dialogue between the protagonist "I" of the novel and the major and the experience of the major can be regarded as a reverse deconstruction of Existentialism. The major appeared after the doctor told me that as long as I go through serious rehabilitation training, "I" can still return to the field in the future, and even play better than before. As the contrast, the major was far more miserable than "me". His hand has shrunk to the size of a baby's hand, and doctors inspire the major with pictures of similar cured cases, but he still does not believe that the new physiotherapy machine can cure his hand, nevertheless, major still let the machine's belt beat up and down to slap his already stiff fingers, while the major kept his eyes fixed on the wall directly in front of him. Everything seemed absurd and nihilistic, and for the major, there seemed to be no hope at all. Moreover, the major's young wife has just died of pneumonia, and the portrayal of the story makes it easy to think of the major's loneliness, disability, and absurd rest of life. More absurdly, the major had just married the young lady until he was certain that his disability would prevent him from going to the war field. Fate is like an absurd and tight net for the major, making him both doomed and helpless. From the perspective of Existentialism, the major seems to be deprived of human existence, and fate has made his essence always precede existence, and can no longer complete "Transcendence". The story ends with the scene where the major looks out of the window with nothingness. The "I" who stays in a foreign land faces the quadruple torture of self and other, body and mind, which proves that Sartre believes that life itself is meaningless, and it seems that there is only pain but nothing more in life. However, it is meaningful to find the meaning of life according to Existentialism. (Sartre, 2014) In this novel, "I" choose "Grace under Pressure" in the face of suffering, and choose to stick to the "Code Hero" image, which is a practical interpretation of Existentialism.

In this short story, the three young men of the same age as "me" who come to the hospital in Milan with "me" for rehabilitation every day because of their wounds on the battlefield can be regarded as typical Existentialists. They were all young, and they each had their own dreams originally. One dreamed of being a lawyer, one wanted to be a painter, and the other one just wanted to be a soldier. Although they eventually came together due to the tide of the times, which people can not control, they all went to the front lines of war and joined the army, they refused to be defined. From the perspective of Existentialism, that is, they refuse to be defined by their own essence. As insignificant individuals in the torrent of the times, they cannot fully control their own destiny, but they proudly choose an attitude to face their fate, and they chose to honorably go to the battlefield. They all fought bravely and were wounded in the end. According to the narration of the protagonist "I" in the story, the three of them are like falcons, and the reason why they won the Hero Medal is different from me. The three of them are natives of Milan, Italy, and there is no American like "me" with these all unique privileges. These three young men can receive the Hero Medal entirely by virtue of their heroic and outstanding performance on the battlefield. Therefore, their attitude towards "me" changed drastically after they knew that I got the medal by fluke. The three young men, facing the arrangement of fate, did not compromise or surrender, but chose to fight bravely, constantly prove themselves, and live hard, which highly reflects their Existentialism spiritual connotation.

The cafe girls in Café Cova and the men and women who crowd on the sidewalk show a completely opposite state to the Existentialists. They seem to be patriotic, and even "I" believe that they love their country very much, but their patriotism is completely fanciful, even with a little stupid. They live under the lavish and feasting, relying on alcohol, leisure and entertainment to spend their leisure time, but they think that they have completed their "patriotic" behavior with only a patriotic heart, and they even did not feel sorry but unremitting and abusive for the soldiers who went onto the battlefield for their country, and got wounded in the war and returned to Milan for treatment. These characters are quite the opposite of an Existentialist. To some extent, they seemd like Existentialists, who refuse to be defined, but the difference is that they live in a false fantasy, they think they are patriots, but the actual behavior has nothing to do with their ideas, and they even insults and despises those real patriots whose essence precedes their existence. Therefore, those are the false images of Existentialists. (Sartre, 2014)

4. Conclusion

Through concise and straightforward language, Hemingway created a classic Existentialism inspirational short story for readers. Although the characters in the novel can not control the arrangement of times and fate, they have chosen to live strong in the face of pain and disaster, and strive to live a better life, thus embody the value of life. As Existentialism philosophy holds, although human life may be full of meaninglessness, the process of searching for the meaning of life is full of meaning. Albert Camus depicted Sisyphus in the ancient Greek mythology in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: Because Sisyphus offended the gods, he was punished to push the boulder from the bottom to the top of the mountain. Each time when it was close to the top, Sisyphus slipped boulder from his hands and it rolled to the bottom of the mountain. Sisyphus had to push the boulder to the top of the mountain again, day after day, year after year. Sisyphus fell into endless hard labor. (Camus, 1987) Existentialists believe that life is full of absurdity and meaninglessness. However, just like Sisyphus who rolls a stone up the mountain day after day, it is the process of people who struggle to find the meaning of life day after day, that is full of meaning.

Heidegger believes that the essence of being is the "de-being" of beings. (Heidegger, 1962) The novel *In Another Country* depicts a protagonist who is in a foreign land, suffering physical and mental torture, three indomitable young Italian soldiers, a major full of absurd experiences, and men and women who deceive and entertain themselves. Through the multi-dimensional depiction of different characters, the "de-existence" process of these characters is shown to readers. It enables people to appreciate the profound meaning of the Existentialism philosophy of "existence precedes essence" for people's life. *In Another Country* undoubtedly has rich enlightenment significance on how people exist in the world, and how to choose to live strong in the face of pain and suffering.

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