



CHARACTER–IDEA UNITY IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY’S NOW I LAY ME

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Abstract

This article provides a theoretically grounded and psychologically oriented analysis of Ernest Hemingway’s short story “*Now I Lay Me*”, focusing on the problem of character–idea unity. Drawing on the principles of literary psychology, modern narratology, and Hemingway’s iceberg theory, the study argues that the central idea of the story is not articulated through explicit authorial commentary but is embodied in the psychological structure of the protagonist, Nick Adams. The analysis demonstrates that trauma, memory, and controlled consciousness function as key mechanisms through which character becomes the primary bearer of meaning. The article contributes to contemporary Hemingway studies by highlighting the inseparability of character formation and ideological content in minimalist prose.

Keywords: Ernest Hemingway, *Now I Lay Me*, character–idea unity, psychological realism, iceberg theory, trauma narrative.

Introduction

The unity of character and idea constitutes one of the central problems of modern literary theory. In twentieth-century prose, particularly within the tradition of psychological realism and modernism, the idea of a literary work is increasingly internalized within character consciousness rather than expressed through overt authorial discourse. Ernest Hemingway’s short story “*Now I Lay Me*” (1927) serves as a paradigmatic example of this tendency.



Unlike traditional war narratives, Hemingway's story avoids direct representation of battle scenes or heroic action. Instead, it centers on a wounded soldier's insomnia and mental self-discipline. This narrative choice foregrounds the psychological consequences of war rather than its external spectacle. The present article examines how the ideological core of the story—war-induced trauma and the struggle for inner order—is realized through the protagonist's character structure.

Theoretical Framework: Character–Idea Unity in Modern Prose

In literary theory, character–idea unity refers to a mode of artistic thinking in which ideological meaning emerges organically from the character's inner world, actions, and perceptions. As M. Bakhtin suggests, character consciousness in modern prose often becomes the primary site of ideological expression rather than a vehicle for predefined authorial ideas.

Hemingway's narrative aesthetics align with this principle through his well-known iceberg theory, according to which the deeper meanings of a text remain implicit and submerged beneath the surface of simple language and restrained narration. In this context, character functions not merely as a participant in events but as a structural embodiment of meaning.

Nick Adams as a Psychological Character Trauma and Fragmented Consciousness

The protagonist, Nick Adams, is presented as a soldier suffering from severe insomnia. His fear of sleep is not physiological but psychological: he believes that losing consciousness may lead to the disintegration of his sense of self. This fear reflects the fragmentation of identity caused by war trauma.

Notably, Hemingway never explicitly names the trauma or describes its origins in detail. Instead, the reader infers the depth of Nick's psychological injury through his compulsive mental routines and rigid self-control. Thus, trauma is encoded within character behavior rather than narrated directly.



Insomnia as an Ideological Motif

Insomnia in “*Now I Lay Me*” functions as both a character trait and an ideological marker. Nick’s refusal to sleep symbolizes his resistance to psychological annihilation. Sleep, conventionally associated with rest and healing, is redefined as a threat to existential continuity.

Through this inversion, Hemingway articulates a broader idea: war destroys the natural rhythms of human existence, forcing individuals to develop artificial strategies of survival. This idea is inseparable from Nick’s character, as it is manifested exclusively through his subjective experience.

Memory as a Strategy of Survival

Controlled Memory and Inner Order

To avoid sleep, Nick deliberately recalls memories of fishing trips and peaceful landscapes. These memories are carefully selected and emotionally neutral, avoiding any association with violence or death. Memory thus becomes a tool of psychological self-regulation.

This strategy reflects a central ideological proposition of the story: the human mind, even when damaged by extreme experience, retains the capacity to construct inner order. The idea is not asserted abstractly but enacted through Nick’s disciplined thought process.

Ethical Dimension of Memory

Nick’s selective remembrance also carries an ethical dimension. By choosing nonviolent memories, he implicitly rejects the moral chaos of war. His character embodies a quiet form of resistance, suggesting that ethical integrity can survive even in conditions of extreme psychological stress.

Minimalism and the Absence of Authorial Commentary

One of the defining features of “*Now I Lay Me*” is the absence of explicit authorial judgment. Hemingway refrains from moralizing or explaining Nick’s condition. This stylistic restraint intensifies the unity of character and idea, as meaning arises solely from what the character does and thinks.



The minimalist narrative voice compels the reader to engage actively in interpretation, reconstructing the ideological framework from subtle psychological cues. In this sense, the story exemplifies modernist narrative ethics, where understanding emerges through empathy rather than instruction.

Universal Significance of the Character–Idea Unity

Although rooted in the historical context of World War I, “*Now I Lay Me*” transcends its immediate setting. Nick Adams is not merely a representative of a specific generation but a universal figure of psychological survival. His character articulates an idea relevant to broader human experience: the struggle to preserve inner coherence in the aftermath of trauma.

The unity of character and idea thus ensures the story’s enduring relevance. Hemingway’s refusal to separate ideological meaning from lived experience allows the narrative to resonate across cultural and temporal boundaries.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that in “*Now I Lay Me*”, character and idea form an indivisible artistic unity. The ideological content of the story—centered on trauma, memory, and psychological self-preservation—is fully embedded within the character of Nick Adams. Hemingway’s minimalist technique and iceberg theory reinforce this unity by eliminating explicit authorial mediation.

As a result, the story exemplifies a modernist model of narrative meaning, where character consciousness becomes the primary locus of ideological expression. This approach not only defines Hemingway’s artistic identity but also contributes significantly to the evolution of twentieth-century psychological prose.

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