
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Journey Narrative in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* and Its Self- Redemption

Mingyue Yu

School of Foreign Languages, Henan University of Technology

Corresponding Author: Mingyue Yu, E-mail: 3031213411@qq.com

ABSTRACT

In *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, American journey writer Ernest Hemingway constructs a dual-threaded narrative that intertwines the protagonist's, Harry, journey experiences in memory and reality. Through the journey narrative, Harry ultimately attains a form of redemption, endowing life with sacred significance. Harry, attempting to escape from reality in order to grapple with the existential crises of the Lost Generation, confronts death in his journey experiences, contemplates the void of existence, and embodies masculinity against nothingness, which is the approach for Hemingway and his generation for the pursuit of meaning and identity. In the modern era, journey remains a crucial means of understanding the world. Thus, an interpretation of journey experiences and the journey narrative as a metaphor for modernity offers valuable insights into human identity.

KEYWORDS

Ernest Hemingway; *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*; journey narrative; self-redemption; metaphor of modernity

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 January 2026

PUBLISHED: 28 January 2026

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2026.9.2.6

1. Introduction

Janis P. Stout argues that the journey in search of home accords with the dominant patterns of American cultural cognition, whereas the journey of returning home runs counter to them: "the home coming occurs with remarkable infrequency in American literature. Our heroes have more typically moved out than back... In American literature, the return home signifies defeat, frustration, the giving up of freedom"(1983, p. 65-66). For the Lost Generation, however, only through returning home could one begin the search for home. "Soldiers who came back from the war found themselves unable to accept the social traditions they had once known. Confronted with postwar American society, these young men returning from the battlefield experienced profound alienation. They found themselves transformed into outsiders, marked by a sense of distance. Their stance had been fundamentally altered, and their scrutiny of the society was inflected with critique and negation"(Yu, 2013). As a result, many of them chose a form of exile. The war thus produced a rupture between the individual and society, generating a state of "cognitive vacuum". Joseph Freeman thinks that you "had to make up your own right and wrong; you had to decide everything for yourself"(Minter, 1996, p.47). Situated within this vacuum, exiles could only continue their journey, in the hope of discovering new beliefs capable of guiding them through the crisis of the age.

Ernest Hemingway stands as a representative journey writer of the Lost Generation, whose protagonists seek new faith through journey experience as a means of self-redemption. Hemingway's extensive journey experiences endow his reflections on death with a distinctive depth. In *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, Harry appears as an anti-hero who, when confronted with spiritual crisis and impending death, engages in a series of redemptive reflections and actions that resonate with Hemingway's meditations on death and journey. From the perspective of journey narrative, this article examines how journey experience propels Harry to revisit death, reconstitute masculinity, and affirm the value of life. The narrative trajectory represents Hemingway's proposed path of redemption for the Lost Generation in its search for value. In modern society, individuals continue to construct self-identity and world cognition through journey practices. The metaphor of modernity embedded in the novel's journey narrative thus carries enduring humanistic significance for understanding the self and the world today.

2. The Anti-Hero and the Crisis of the Age

Characters in Hemingway's fiction are often described as "code hero", defined by their courage in the face of death and their dignity under extreme pressure. Harry, however, is introduced as an anti-hero. At the beginning of the novel, he tells his wife Helen that he only wants to talk, because "It's much easier if I talk" (Hemingway, 1953, p. 52). Yet, "action is more important to the Western hero than talk" (Plath, 1999, p.74). Harry's preference for speech over action thus signals a loss of agency. Another defining trait of the hero is composure about which he doesn't easily externalize his feelings. Aware from the outset of his impending death, Harry chooses to pass the time through quarrelling. He repeatedly humiliates Helen with harsh language, venting his frustration in order to mask his cowardice in the face of death. The more vicious his words become, the weaker his capacity for action appears. Hemingway's heroes are termed "code heroes" because they act according to the personal code, even at the cost of death. Harry, however, abandons the discipline of his code under the temptations of hedonism. He relinquishes his identity as a writer, betrays his self-imposed principles, and fails to persevere in the rigorous cultivation of his craft, ultimately succumbing to moral and artistic decline.

Yet this was what once "he despised" (Hemingway, 1953, p.59). The novel offers no detailed explanation for Harry's contempt for hedonism. Its significance becomes clear when the text is situated within its historical context. As a member of the Lost Generation, Harry experienced a disruption of his prewar worldview in the aftermath of the First World War. The returning soldiers recognizing the bloody violence concealed beneath the glory. Thus, they ceased to believe in the ideals of civilization, morality, and democracy. The war victory thus amounted to a moral collapse. Disgusted by materialism, Harry initially disdains the hedonistic excess. Yet the war shattered his social ideals, thus after the war he no longer upholds a sense of social responsibility. Refusing to confront reality, he turns to escapism and anesthetizes himself through indulgence. He therefore despises hedonism and is unavoidably complicit in it, becoming trapped in the crisis of the age. By introducing Harry as an anti-hero at the outset, Hemingway depicts not merely an individual predicament but situates the story against the collective crisis of the Lost Generation.

Hero "privilege experiential over book knowledge" (Plath, 1999, p.71): experience generates cognitive understanding and disciplines the body. The hero therefore seeks the experience of a journey rather than that of tourism. The former "refers not only, in a physical sense, to distance traveled and the rigors of the road, but is elevated to a metaphorical plane that signifies spiritual growth and lived experience" (Tian, 2024, p.120). While the latter denotes recreational sightseeing. The African trip is described as "no hardship" (Hemingway, 1953, p.60). And Helen's social status renders the trip essentially touristic rather than physically demanding. Such recreational trip aligns with a hedonistic ethos: spiritual emptiness anticipates corporeal extinction, and the fatal injury sustained during journey ultimately forces Harry to recognize the unsustainability of escapism. "In the Western hero, skill and experience combine to produce an individual who is so exceptional and knowledgeable of all aspects of life—death included..." (Plath, 1999, p.76). For the anti-hero to become a hero, and for the Lost Generation to get away from its crisis, it is necessary to confront death and to reengage with its meaning.

3. Retracing Death through Journey Experience

The narrative constructs a dual timeline through the alternation of roman and italic typefaces: the former denotes the present reality, while the latter evokes Harry's past journey experiences. Prior to the first recollection, Harry feels "tired" (Hemingway, 1953, p.55) after his failed escape from reality. Evasion renders everything worse, compelling him to confront his death. Only by recognizing death can one properly face it. The recollection center on wartime experience, as war constitutes the primary site through which Harry first comes to know death. Of the seven snow images in the recollection, six are associated with Harry's experiences of war, forming a narrative tension with the sacred symbolism of the snow mountain, figured in the epigraph as the "House of God". Hemingway's writing follows the iceberg principle: when the author is familiar with his subject, meaning is conveyed through omission. And because this story is "autobiographical" (Dussinger, 1967, p.54), with Hemingway's life experience, the seemingly contradictory narrative surface yields a deeper layer of significance.

William E. Barton exerted a formative influence on Hemingway's early identity consciousness. Barton maintains that redemption is achieved through self-mastery. His conception of self-mastery is gendered: it is framed as a male virtue, and the practice of self-mastery serves as an enactment of masculinity. Accordingly, the performance of masculinity as a means of attaining divine meaning in life constituted an imperative for the young Hemingway. However, exposure to the battlefield and to death led to his faith diminishing. Because "at the moment you die, you have already ceased to exist. Our illusions of immortality... only serve to mask the meaninglessness of our lives" (Norris, 2021, p.99). The notion of sacred eternity bestowed upon humanity thus collapses. Hemingway therefore "takes no solace in the possibility of an afterlife but instead confronts meaninglessness head on" (Norris, 2021, p.99). Hemingway's repeated encounters with death in wartime, overcome through physical courage, reinforced his confidence in masculinity. War taught Hemingway that masculinity could prevail over death. Masculinity thus became his faith. He ultimately concludes that the performance of masculinity no longer aims at metaphysical eternity, but at overcoming death and nihilism in order to affirm individual value (Norris, 2021, p.85-99).

Hemingway's meditation on death is projected onto Harry's journey experiences. In the war recollections, geographical settings shift frequently, from Turkey to Bulgaria, Italy, and finally Austria. Spatially, Harry repeatedly recalls the deaths of others during wartime. Psychologically, each recollection intensifies his inquiry into death and deepens his recognition of the necessity of masculinity. As Stout observes, "The quest, then, tends to be a mental journey; its 'real' spatial dimension tends to recede or lose substance and its symbolic import to become dominant" (1983, p.90). Through this inward journey, Harry learns that confronting nihilism through masculinity is the means by which life acquires meaning. In the second recollection, Harry returns from the front to Paris, where representations of the Dadaist movement further reinforce the postwar theme of nothingness. Harry's reflections on death are grounded in his journey experiences. The traveler mirrors personal experience and the journey route parallel the life course. Through this journey of memory, he retraces encounters with death and prepares himself for the final stage of life. Returning to the present, Harry no longer "slipped into the familiar lie he made his bread and butter by" (Hemingway, 1953, p.58). He recognizes that although death dissolves all meaning, human greatness lies in resisting that void. To face death with masculinity marks life's most sacred moment. In the third recollection, Harry's consciousness moves through Paris squares, streets, cafes, hotels and shops. This continual displacement symbolizes his vitality, for "immobility reminds us of that ultimate fact of life—i.e., Death—we remain eager to prove we're still alive by moving around and rubbing up against our fellow traveler" (Mewshaw, 2005, p.2). In the final recollection, a severely wounded comrade begs for a quick death, as painkillers prove ineffective. Harry himself had once feared pain, using medication to numb injury akin to indulging into escapism and nihilism. After the recollection ends, however, Harry finds that everything has become "easy" (Hemingway, 1953, p.73), signaling his release from the fear of pain and his rejection of his comrade's attempt to flee death. Recognizing the necessity of masculinity in overcoming nihilism and affirming personal value, Harry resolves in the present to reconstruct his masculinity and achieve self-redemption.

4 Masculinity and Self-Redemption

In the narrative, Harry's self-awareness undergoes a threefold progressive transformation through his journey experiences, driven by a renewed confrontation with death and the reconstruction of masculinity. The first transformation occurs at the end of the first recollection, when Harry realizes that evasion cannot overcome nihilism and that only by confronting it with masculinity can he prevail. This awakening compels him to face reality and acknowledge that "laziness", "sloth", "snobbery", "pride" and "prejudice" (Hemingway, 1953, p.60) had led him to live a self-contemptuous life rather than "make his living with... a pen or a pencil" (Hemingway, 1953, p.60). The second transformation manifests in the reconfiguration of his interpersonal relationships. Recognizing the destructiveness of death, Harry ceases quarrels with Helen, adopts a gentle attitude, and actively greets her upon her return from hunting. Since quarrels cannot dispel nihilism: "with the corrosion of the quarrelling, killed what they had together" (Hemingway, 1953, p.64), the shift in his words and emotions signals the gradual restoration of a self-disciplined masculinity. The third transformation is achieved through the spiritual momentum gained from his Paris journey experience. When Harry politely refuses Helen with "No, thank you very much" (Hemingway, 1953, p.71), the change in his speech reveals that he has shed the need to mask his previous lack of agency with harsh words. His declaration, "I've been writing" (Hemingway, 1953, p.74), not only emphasizes his ongoing and self-initiated action, but also signifies that by reestablishing his personal code, he reverses anti-heroic image and constructs meaningful existence. Fully aware of death's imminence and calmly enduring it, Harry embodies the masculinity Hemingway valorizes.

In the end, Harry envisions the snow mountain in his imagination, "he knew that there was where he was going" (Hemingway, 1953, p.76). The sacred symbolism of the mountain in the epigraph corresponds to the human masculinity Harry manifests in his imagined flight toward it. The imagination of flight embodies a Hemingway-style secularized religiosity:

As Anna McHugh observes, depictions of spiritual or soul journey constitute an alternative paradigm of journey writing. This second paradigm involves... a theological conception... wherein metaphysical landscapes are closely tied to the narrator's mental state, allowing life experiences to be reflected upon and invested with meaning. Such narratives do not pursue an external "foreign land," but explore the inner life, culminating in the apprehension of spiritual or theological truth. (Xu, Tian, 2020, p.39) Hemingway does not wholly reject religion. He acknowledges ritual practice, which he sees as an engagement with nihilism. Yet nihilism implies freedom, allowing individuals to determine their own beliefs. Thus, "a self-identified unbeliever find value in a ritual practice" (Norris, 2021, p.220). His imagined aerial pilgrimage toward the mountain exemplifies heroic journey of secularized ritualized redemption.

Indeed, Harry achieves redemption through his personal masculinity, yet this would have been impossible without journey experiences. Journey allows him to observe others and reflect upon himself. On the plains, the hyenas mirror Harry's mental state: while Harry squanders Helen's wealth, the hyenas await his corpse and reap the benefits. The hyenas stand to Harry as Harry stands to Helen. In Africa, Harry is not only geographically, but also psychologically, removed from the mainstream environment, enabling him to appraise himself objectively as an outsider. As Edward Said observes, "The more one is able to leave one's cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it..." (Said, 1979).

The novel employs the journey narrative to articulate a redemption in which masculinity triumphs over death. Memory and present reality constitute the warp and weft of the novel's narrative, as "the memory of a more heroic past" propelling "present ignoble situation" (Macdonald, 1974, p.71). When the characters' behaviors are in conjunction with the historical context of the early twentieth century, the narrative acquires a broader significance. It is no longer Harry's personal journey, but Hemingway's meditation on the value of the Lost Generation, and indeed humanity as a whole: confronting death courageously, human beings demonstrate life's grandeur through robust masculinity.

5 Journey Narrative and Its Metaphor of modernity

The novel presents Harry's redemption through journey. Although the real author exists outside the text, his background and experiences shape the creation of the implied author. As a journey writer, Hemingway himself traveled extensively. In his youth, lacking worldly experience, Hemingway imagined life with idealized fantasies. War, however, awakened him. Witnessing the final thrust in a bullfight in Spain, he grasped the essence of life: the matador's fearlessness in the face of the charging bull embodies humanity's capacity to confront death and affirm individual value (Norris, 2021, p.200). Admittedly, "Hemingway's moral valuations were grounded in the love of killing" (Norris, 2021, p.225), yet this must be understood in the historical context. The Lost Generation, as a rebellious cohort, rejected prewar traditions and were inevitably uprooted. They regarded themselves as exiles, for whom continuous journey offered the only possibility of discovering new moral convictions. Having experienced war, Hemingway could not escape the formative impact of killing. Thus, seeking redemption through journey was both a consequence and an imperative of the era. Journey experiences function as a window into Hemingway's quest for identity, thus raising the contemporary question: how might journey today serve as a means for understanding humanity and the world?

"In spite of Levi-Strauss's grumpy protesting against travelling and explorers, not even he could deny that anthropology and travel are intrinsically connected" (Ivona, 2012, p.45). Human history has been closely linked to journey, whether the "migrations of population, nomadism, and the long-distance journeys of merchants and adventurers" in pre-modern times, or "regular and dense forms of mobility provided for by modern means of transportation" (Giddens, 1990, p.103) in the modern era. With the advent of modern society, the study of modernity has become a major focus in the humanities and social sciences, yet there is no consensus on its precise definition. Scholar Tian Junwu suggests that Marshall Berman's conception of modernity appears suited to the research of anthropology and sociology. Berman writes:

THERE IS a mode of vital experience... that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience "modernity." To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world-and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut. (1982, p.15)

Thus emerges the metaphor of modernity of journey: it is progressive, as journey is fundamentally an experiential practice through which individuals traverse unknown boundaries and gain renewal; it is reflective, since the transformation of space entails not only changes in geographical appearance but also disruptions of cultural and intellectual assumptions. Most importantly, it is universal: journey is an experience shared by all humanity, and the metaphor of modernity of journey expands the subject from the male to all humankind.

Both Barton's and Hemingway's considerations of masculinity are gendered, and travel was initially a gendered activity: many cultural critiques of journey carry "gendered metaphors" (Wolff, 1993, p.224). In *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Brett as a woman cannot serve as the hero of the narrative, since she cannot embody masculinity, and her social status precludes independent journey comparable to men. A decade later, in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, Helen accompanies Harry on his journey, yet her social position allows her to undertake journey independently. Hemingway's journey narrative thus reflects a shift in the possibilities of journey subjects.

As early as the eighteenth century, journey and journey narrative were no longer exclusively male domains. "*The Virago Book of Women Travellers* (1994) compiles over fifty works by women, documenting the geographical scope and travel experiences of female travelers from the eighteenth to the twentieth century" (Chen, Zhou, 2022, p.81). While women were once considered marginal, they are no longer merely objects of the gaze. Women's journey narratives challenge gender bias, granting them the power to choose their identities. When women begin to practice their journey, the traditional association of masculinity with mobility and femininity with sessility is disrupted (Chen, Zhou, 2022, p.81). Whereas readers formerly perceived the world through a male lens, they can now also engage with it from a female perspective. Journey is inherently experiential, and "How travelers tell their stories, to whom and what their experiences tell us about the circumstances are in many ways as meaningful as the journeys themselves" (Taylor, 2022, p.4). In this sense, the metaphor of modernity of journey finds concrete expression at the level of journey narrative.

Mei Li observes that feminist writer appropriate popular culture to produce fiction, and when such novels are examined within contemporary cultural contexts, "it becomes apparent that they have transcended the traditional definition as a cultural form, becoming a new mode of cultural creation and expression for social ideology, power structures, and discursive systems." It is a mode committed to freedom, equality, and pluralistic cultural and political concerns (Mei, 2011, p.213). Women's journey narrative shares this vision. Feminist writers offer novel perspectives that allow readers to challenge cognitive biases and to "realize their provincialism and recognize their ignorance" (Fussell, 1987, p.14).

Literature is a study of humanity. In narrative terms, breaking the boundaries of male-centered storytelling not only opens new possibilities for literary creation but also for understanding human experience. In the shared narrative space of male and female voices, readers may gain a more objective perspective on the world and on humanity itself.

6 Conclusion

"Nowhere is this nada—the void, emptiness, meaninglessness—more insistent than in ... *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*" (Stoltzfus, 2010, p.79). Yet the narrative focus is never on nihilism itself, but on human masculinity that overcomes it. The novel's conclusion returns to reality, signaling the author's reminder that the living must still face life's challenges. Harry's journey experiences show life remains imbued with both void and the potential to triumph over it. Hemingway's journey narratives contribute to human understanding and dignity. As members of the Lost Generation, perceived as "orphans" of their era, individuals could only seek new homes through wandering. Hemingway, drawing upon his own journey experiences, explored ways of life suitable for this generation and, through journey narratives, affirmed their dignity and value. Today, through journey experiences, readers can confront their own ignorance in encounters with others, and apprehend the world's authentic contours, ensuring that every life retains the right to a free and equitable expression.

Funding: This research was funded by the 2025 Henan Provincial Philosophy and Social Sciences Planning Project, "Chinese Cultural Representation in Chinese American Literature and Its Overseas Dissemination (1980–2020)", grant number 2025BW001.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

- [1] Berman, Marshall. (1982). *All That is Solid Melt into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. Penguin.
- [2] Chen, Xiaolan, Zhou, Lingyi. (2022). Travel, Masculinity and Femininity: The Gender Perspective on "Studies of Travel Writings" in Britain and America. *Journal of East China Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 54(05), 80-89+190.
- [3] Dussinger, Gloria R. (1967). "The Snows of Kilimanjaro": Harry's Second Chance. In Hoskins, Frank L Jr., *Studies in Short Fiction* 5 (Number 1, Fall 1961). Newberry College.
- [4] Fussell, P. (1987). Introduction. In Fussell P., *The Norton Book of Travel*. Norton.
- [5] Giddens, Anthony. (1990). *The Consequences of Modernity*. Polity Press.
- [6] Hemingway, E. (1953). *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- [7] Ivona, Grgurinović. (2012). Anthropology and Travel: Practice and Text. *Studia Ethnologica Croatica*, 24(1), 45-60.[8]
- [8] Macdonald, S. (1974). Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro": Three Critical Problems. In Hoskins, Frank L Jr., *Studies in Short Fiction Volume 6* (Number 1, Winter 1974). Newberry College.
- [9] Mei, Li. (2011). Feminist Popular Fiction as a "Producterly Text". *Foreign Literature Review*, (02), 204-213.
- [10] Mewshaw, Michael. (2005). Travel, Travel Writing, and the Literature of Travel. *South Central Review*, 22(2), 2-10.
- [11] Minter, David. (1996). *A Cultural History of the American Novel*. Cambridge University Press.
- [12] Norris, Marcos Antonio. (2021). Hemingway, Sartre, and Secularization: Finding Religion Without God. Loyola University Chicago.
- [13] Plath, James. (1999) Shadow Rider: The Hemingway Hero as Western Archetype. In *Fleming E. Hemingway and the Natural World*(pp.69-86). University of Idaho Press.
- [14] Said, Edward W. (1979). *Orientalism*. Vintage Books.

- [15] Stoltzfus, Ben. (2010). *Hemingway and the French Writers*. The Kent State UP.
- [16] Stout, Janis P. (1983). *The Journey Narrative in American Literature: Patterns and Departures*. Greenwood Press.
- [17] Taylor, Tom. (2022). *Modern Travel in World History*. Routledge.
- [18] Tian, Junwu. (2024). Anthropology of Travel. *Journal of SJTU(Philosophy and Social Science)*, 32(03), 118-130.
- [19] Wolff, Janet. (1993). On the Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in Cultural Criticism. *Cultural Studies*, 7(2), 224-239.
- [20] Xu, siyuan, Tian, junwu. (2020). John Clellon Holmes's *Go*: A Pioneering Novel of the Beat Generation and Its Journey Narrative. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 41(01), 35-41.
- [21] Yu, Jianhua. (2013). *What Is "Lost Generation" Literature?* Shanghai: Shanghai Education & Foreign Languages Press.