

The Analysis of the Heroine Renata in Across the River and into the Trees

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Abstract: Renata, the heroine, in *Across the River and into the Trees*, is different from other female characters in Hemingway's works. She is only nineteen years old, naive as she is, but still clings to her independent will. In the eyes of the hero, Colonel Cantwell, she is not only a sweet lover, but also the embodiment of youth and goodness. Through creating this role, Hemingway expresses the infinite affection towards and unremitting pursuit of a beautiful life.

1. Introduction

Across the River and into the Trees is a novel by American writer Ernest Hemingway. Narrates the stories between the retired Colonel Cantwell and Countess Renata which happened during the former's visit to the city of Venice. There are two main story lines in the book: the Colonel's recollection of the war and his interaction with Renata in Venice, the former is imaginary while the latter is real [1]. They interweave with and complement each other, forming some fascinating episodes. The whole plot proceeds over a very short span of only three to four days, but it explicitly tells the Colonel's suffering during the war and the great damage to his spirit. It vividly depicts the image of a man who is extremely anti-war and longs for a better life.

To a certain extent, this role reflects Hemingway's real-life experience and thinking and also shows readers the author's strong sense of anti-war and his concern for the future and destiny of mankind.

2. Literature review—who is Renata?

The previous researches and opinions of the profile of the character, Renata, can be roughly divided into three perspectives.

The more prevailing one deems that Renata is based on an Italian girl named Adriana in reality. Hemingway came across her on a hunting trip and fell in love with the beauty because of her bright mind and mild-mannered temperament. They maintained a Platonic relationship. After each meeting with her, Hemingway's creative desire often greatly increased. In real life, however, they did not go beyond the boundaries of mere friends as Cantwell and Renata did in the book.

While the other perspective, which is relatively less popular, proposed by scholars and researchers suggests this book is greatly relevant to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the Easter weekend

and serves as a salute or tribute from Hemingway to the classic and Christianity since the author used a lot of allusions from Dante[2]. And although the book has 272 pages, the time span of the whole story only covers three days, which corresponds with the three days of Easter. This argument is also verified by Renata's series of characteristics.

In addition, some critics have argued that Renata's character is unreal. Hemingway's biographer, Jeffrey Meyers, for example, sees Renata as the embodiment of the Colonel's view of Venice. She links the Colonel to Venice. In another sense, it's Hemingway's connection to Venice [3].

There is no one right or wrong between these three stances, and the combination of them will help the reader to have a better understanding of Renata, and more importantly, the main idea of the novel *Across the River into the Tress*.

The name, Renata, comes from the Italian word "rinato", which has the same meaning as "rebirth" [3]. Renata does bring the Colonel a sense of mantle revitalization. Experiencing the ravages of war, Cantwell is impotent both physically and spiritually. However, Renata cures him with her tenderness and leads him through a path of reminiscence to reach the final relief. She is just like the "Beatricean aura of Renata", who leads Dante through his hell [2]. Colonel, or Hemingway himself, gained consolation and liberation, completed a spiritual pilgrimage with the companion of this tender and considerate girl.

Based on the book and former studies, the following context will try to sort out Renata's most striking characteristics and the relationships between her and the colonel through examples.

3. Renata's personal traits

3.1 Innocence

Countess Renata, who is not yet nineteen, is innocent. She cannot stand Colonel's rough language and dislikes his rudeness to others. She holds the notion that "only those jokes which are not rude can be described as funny. [1]" And she does not even comprehend what the word "stupid" stands for. She hopes that the Colonel can try not to die in the long term so that they can spend more time together thus she can hear the Colonel confess his love to her time after time. Besides, it seems that she does not understand the cruelty of the battlefield at all. All she has about war and killing is her curiosity, which drives her to keep asking the Colonel what war was like. It is also her innocence that makes her even fall asleep out of boredom when the Colonel is recalling his days leading the troops.

This kind of characteristic may not be expressed and conveyed to readers clearly if the author just write down these plots and descriptions plainly. But the brilliance of Hemingway's writing is by creating the role of the colonel's ex-wife to make Renata's personal trait more vivid. The contrast between these two female figures is rather stark. The Colonel's ex-wife is a journalist who married the Colonel just to get to know more people in the army while the latter one really truly loves the Colonel regardless of the gap in social status and age lied across them.

Every time Renata begs Cantwell to tell her what it was like to fight, he will say in the first place, "Tell me you love me," and Renata will always respond positively, hoping she can transmit her hope and aspiration on life to the Colonel who is near his end. With the company of Renata, the Colonel retrieves his vision for a better tomorrow and forget about his pain and illness. He forget the trauma of the war and tries to grasp every opportunity to enjoy every moment of life.

3.2 Independence

Hemingway has long been known for his "tough guy" style of writing. Those famous figures he created, such as Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* and Robert Jordan from *For Whom the Bell*

Tolls, are both determined and dauntless. But he has been criticized for being a misogynist, leading to some controversial female images in his works, most of which are “slaves of love” and closely adhere to the concept of the supremacy of love, with their lives attached to a certain male. Typical examples embrace Maria in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Catherine from *A Farewell to the Weapons* [4]. Renata in this book, though also indulges in the fantasy of love, still retains a strong sense of independence.

Colonel Cantwell is not a physically fit man. In fact, he struggles with a sexual dysfunction handicap and is tortured by constant illness and fear of a heart attack. Renata, as a noble and wealthy countess, spontaneously fall in love with Colonel and does not care about other’s opinions. She will be offended by the Colonel’s commanding look and tone but she does not fear the eyes of her surroundings when she wants to bathe herself in the Colonel’s room, because of her belief in her reputation. Much as she loved him, she unhesitatingly turns down his joking proposal to have sexual behaviors before heading for dinner. She says that “I love my country, the soldiers, and I respect them more than anyone else.” Ever since she would ask something related to this, not only to ease his pains, but to give him a chance to go over that glorious period of time [1].

Renata is much more than just a nineteen-year-old girl who does not know what she is doing or someone that wholeheartedly dreams of a better tomorrow. She has her own persistence and mature world outlook. Even more preciously, she sticks to it.

4. The relationship between Colonel Cantwell and Renata

Colonel Cantwell and Renata are lovers, of course, but the relationship between the two is complicated by the age gap, consolation, and a strong sense of anti-war. The huge age difference has created a pseudo-father-daughter relationship. While, Renata, who brings comfort and relief to the colonel, is seen by the latter as much as a redeemer. More importantly, the trauma caused by the war caused the Colonel or the author, Hemingway, to see their relationship with Renata as their best defence against self-destruction. These three treads intertwine with each other to form and fabricate an elaborate but rather unparalleled relationship between the hero and heroine.

4.1 Father and daughter

The Colonel often calls Renata “daughter” whether in public or in private. It is worth noting that Hemingway also referred to the aforementioned Adriana as his daughter in real life, which seems to further prove that Adriana was the model for Renata. In addition to reality projection, there are several reasons why the Colonel calls Renata this name.

One is that the age difference between them is enough to let Colonel be Renata’s father, and he loves Renata very much.

The other reason is that in public, the Colonel is not willing to allow rumors to tarnish Renata, and uses the word “daughter” to represent the purity of their relationship [3]. For example, in the book, when the two go to a hotel for lobster, the Colonel deliberately uses this name in front of others [1].

Thirdly, also the most meaningful one, it’s because the Colonel is going to die in both mind and body. If Renata is his daughter, even though the colonel died a few years later, a part of him still lives on. His love relationship with the young and beautiful Renata can be seen as the Colonel’s memory of youth and the pursuit of eternity.

4.2 The redeemer and the redeemed

Just as stated above, the Colonel suffers a lot from the afflicting memory of war, while the

innocent Renata acts as a super effective remedy and medicine which can let him forget the pain and trauma for a while. But in the grand scheme of things, considering the distinct moods and behaviors of the Colonel at the beginning and the end of the novel, it is fair to say that Renata brings him a new lease of life. Only the rebirth is spiritual rather than physical, for at last the colonel died alone in the woods.

One specific example of this feature is in Chapter 30. The colonel gets lost in his painful, even agonizing memory of a war in which a whole regiment was annihilated by the rivals. This recollection is so overwhelming that the Colonel says he could not remember anything related to happiness and wonderful things in life. He almost fails to continue to narrate. The author created a picture of dizziness to describe the Colonel's mental activity. "Light on the ceiling... changing as the sun moved. [1]" In such a kind of spiritual disorder, it is Renata who kept encouraging him to recall and stay sober. She keeps saying that "Please... Please tell me... Until you are purged of it. [1]" The conversation about war with Renate is exhausting for Colonel but it is also a kind of relieving and lightening confession [2].

4.3 War and sex

Another critical clue in their relationship and also an interesting point in the book is that when Hemingway describes the sex scenes between the Colonel and Renata, he usually uses war scenes to refer to it. For example, during a night tour of Venice, the Colonel and Renata make love on the boat. Renata says, "I just captured Paris." The Colonel replies, "What comes next is twenty-eight divisions will be assembled for inspection." [1]

The use of war scenes to allude to sex scenes is not original to Hemingway. But most writers want to show that sex and war are similar in their primal nature, both derived from an expanding desire and an insatiable desire for more, both predatory and invasive. Hemingway's usage here is more to show that sex is the primitive instinctive impulse of human beings. The sexual behavior between two lovers is full of love for life and the author hopes to use hot sex to fight against the death brought by war.

5. Conclusion—war and peace

The contrast between the ageing Colonel and the young and beautiful Renata is as sharp as the contrast between the cruelty of war and the good life. The pain of the war makes Colonel Cantwell to be pessimistic about the future of mankind, but Renata makes him calm and ready to find the last joy in life and die in peace. Renata is the embodiment of youth, love, sincerity and ideal, which makes the Colonel's life fire explode with beautiful brilliance before it is extinguished, which is exactly what the author Hemingway wanted to pursue after the war [5].

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