Domesticity and Liminal Tracks: The Modernist Railway Spaces in Ernest Hemingway's Short Fiction

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Abstract:

In early twentieth-century modernist literature, the railway stands as a prominent emblem of the fragmentation, displacement, and spatial restructuring brought about by technological modernity. While Ernest Hemingway is often associated with themes of rugged wilderness, wartime battlefields, and expatriate urban cafés, his short fiction frequently deploys railway infrastructures as crucial and highly symbolic spaces of existential suspension and psychological transition. This paper investigates how Hemingway uses stations, platforms, and train compartments to map the interior crises of the "Lost Generation" through a diachronic examination of five pivotal short stories: "A Canary for One" (1927), "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927), "Homage to Switzerland" (1932), "The Battler" (1925), and "The Light of the World" (1933).

In "Hills Like White Elephants," the Spanish junction between Barcelona and Madrid serves as a stark literal and figurative crossroads, where parallel tracks and a divided landscape mirror a couple's unresolved dispute over an unplanned pregnancy. In "A Canary for One," the suffocating confinement of a European train compartment exposes the gradual disintegration of an American marriage, suggesting that emotional breakdown can occur alongside physical transit. In "Homage to Switzerland," a formally experimental triptych features three interchangeable American protagonists waiting for the same delayed train in a Swiss station café. Hemingway uses the standardized and repetitive architecture of the railway station to fragment a single masculine psyche, rendering private traumas legible through the ritual of transit.

Moving from continental Europe to the American Midwest, "The Battler" uses the physical violence of being thrown from a freight train to initiate the protagonist, Nick Adams, into a marginalized world of hoboes, racial tension, and trauma located just beyond the apparent safety of the tracks. Finally, "The Light of the World" repositions the small-town railway station waiting-room as a democratic yet purgatorial space where outcasts and travellers converge, highlighting the erosion of spiritual anchors in a rapidly changing world.

By bringing together insights from spatial literary studies and the humanities of mobility, this paper argues that Hemingway's minimalist prose provides a remarkably effective aesthetic vehicle for capturing what Schivelbusch (2014) calls the "panoramic perception" of rail travel. Far from functioning as mere backdrops, Hemingway's railway networks operate as active architectural spaces that generate, amplify, and reflect the alienation, fractured communication, and shifting gender dynamics characteristic of early twentieth-century transatlantic culture.

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