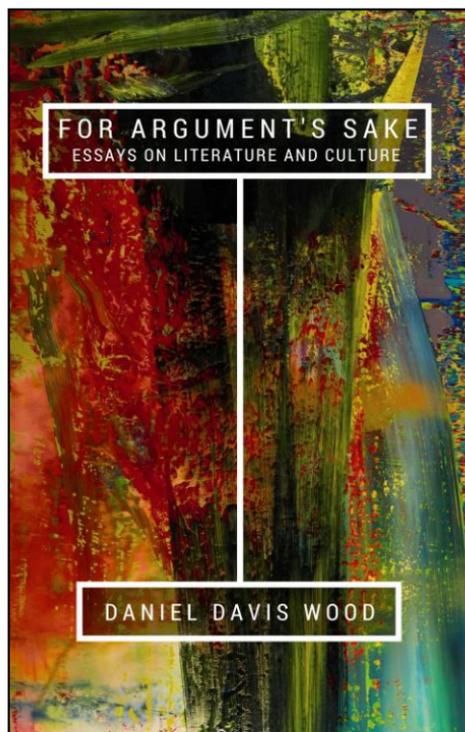


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 157-163.

It appears here, in PDF format, exactly as it appears in print.



[www.danieldaviswood.com](http://www.danieldaviswood.com)

THE OTHER SEVEN-EIGHTHS  
OF THE ICEBERG

PEERING BENEATH THE SURFACE OF  
ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S SIX-WORD STORY

This essay originally appeared in *Philament* 15 (December 2009): 100-104.

AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS CELEBRITY IN THE 1950s, ERNEST HEMINGWAY gave a now-famous interview in which he credited the emotional power of his fiction to what he called “the principle of the iceberg” (Plimpton, “The Art of Fiction”). An iceberg, he pointed out, floats in the Arctic with only one-eighth of its mass above water while the greater, more potentially devastating portion hides beneath the surface and attracts our concern precisely because it is hidden. Along much the same lines, he reasoned, the drama of a story can attract our concern if we are allowed to glimpse only a fragment of visible action that implies an earlier, unseen experience of greater magnitude and emotional significance. Thus, in his stories, rather than simply detailing narrative events to allow readers to witness a drama unfolding, Hemingway often depicts only the consequences of such events in a single representative scene from which readers must infer the drama. In story after story, he effectively positions his readers as voyeurs eavesdropping on the aftermath of a bitter dispute between lovers, or as snoops lingering alongside some lonesome individual whose company we enter by illicit means. He draws our attention to a dramatic scenario by carefully denying us a clear view of its causes. He concentrates our concern on the dramatic tensions that he keeps beyond the pages of the story by meticulously foregrounding their absence.

At about the same time Hemingway gave that interview, he wrote what is easily the most radical and perhaps the most famous of his ‘iceberg’ stories — a story with so much detail excised that he wrote it from start to finish on one side of a paper napkin. In fact, the diminutive napkin was exactly what inspired the extreme brevity of the story. While enjoying a meal in the company of half-a-dozen friends, Hemingway held his napkin aloft and wagered the others ten dollars apiece that it could serve as a canvas large enough to contain an entire short story. Given the audacity of his proposition, his friends were more than willing to wager against him; but, less

than a minute later, Hemingway settled the bet when he scribbled a story on the napkin, presented it to his audience, convinced them of his skill, and collected his just rewards. This is the story he wrote:

For sale:  
baby shoes,  
never worn.

By any measure, those six words demonstrate the power of Hemingway's 'iceberg principle' at its heartbreaking best. On first reading, we infer that a newborn infant has died, although both its birth and its death have been absented from the text and pushed beneath the surface of the narrative. On further reflection, we infer that the death of the child has left its mother desperately impoverished and in need of financial aid, otherwise she would have no reason to advertise the sale of something as commercially worthless as a pair of baby shoes. From her prior purchase of the shoes, we then infer the joy and the nervousness she must have experienced in her anticipation of childbirth, and from this anticipation we finally infer the trauma and grief she must have experienced when her child died or arrived stillborn. Alternatively, recalling the ending of Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms*, we may infer that the father of the child placed the sales advertisement and that it is he who now endures the trauma of losing both his child and its mother during its delivery. Or we may instead recall Hemingway's most celebrated story, 'Hills Like White Elephants,' and infer that the child's mother bought the shoes when she first learned that she was pregnant, but that the child's father has since destroyed her expectations of childbirth by pressuring her to seek an abortion.

After just a moment's contemplation, then, a handful of carefully chosen words can yield great depths of meaning and allow us to glimpse a narrative far more elaborate than what actually appears on the page. This Zen-like aspect of the story's minimalist structure is surely the source of its longevity — a longevity that, most recently, has seen the story embraced as an object of widespread public celebration and creative imitation. In 2006, *Wired* magazine asked

thirty-six world-renowned science fiction writers to follow Hemingway's lead and compose an original story using only six words (see Various, 'Very Short Stories'). Joss Whedon, Neil Gaiman, William Gibson, and Margaret Atwood were among the industry heavyweights who rose to the challenge. In early 2007, *The Guardian* posed the same challenge to an even more dignified array of literary stars including Booker Prize-winners A.S. Byatt, Yann Martel, and D.B.C. Pierre, as well as Pulitzer Prize-winners Richard Ford and Jeffrey Eugenides alongside twenty-five others (see Various, 'To cut'). Later that year, the BBC extended the challenge to its several million radio listeners by asking them to produce their own six-word stories for potential publication in an anthology inspired by Hemingway (see Various, 'Life in Six Words'), and in January 2009 the Arts Council of England donated an impressive £27,000 to a youth engagement project that encouraged young Londoners to do the same thing (see Gorse). Earlier, in 2007, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Edward P. Jones attributed the story to Hemingway in a speech at that year's PEN/Hemingway Prize ceremony ('Keynote Address' 13), and the novelist and short story writer Robert Drewe made the same attribution shortly thereafter (see 'The Short Story'). Finally, and most recently, public celebration of Hemingway's six-word story arrived on Australian shores when ABC-TV and Triple-J radio personality Marieke Hardy opened the 2009 NSW Premier's Literary Awards with a keynote address that targeted the story for particular praise (see 'Lap up literature'). There is, however, a problem with this continued celebration of those six words on that paper napkin: the story behind the story is itself only a story, since Ernest Hemingway never actually wrote the words that these public voices now want us to cherish him for writing.

Professional researchers have reported as much. The resident mythbusters at Snopes.com have debunked the story's attribution to Hemingway with reference to a range of alternative sources from which it might have truly originated (see Mikkelson). Having myself recently trawled through the entirety of Hemingway's published works, including posthumously-published letters and private writings, I can confirm these findings. The story behind the six-word

story is, at best, apocryphal: if in fact Hemingway did write this story, he wrote it only for his audience at that dinner table and withheld it from the world at large. This does not at all devalue its power, of course, but it does raise the question of how exactly Hemingway came to be credited as its author in the first place. The Snopes researchers have traced the story's provenance to a fictional dinner-table scene in a theatrical production based on Hemingway's life, which was reported as fact in a New York tabloid newspaper (see Kissel); but still, this explanation of how the misattribution happened does not help us to understand how it first came to be *credible*. Before anyone actually began to believe that Hemingway wrote the six-word story, what exactly might have inclined some to believe that he was capable of, and interested in, writing such a story at all?

The answer must lie in his giving expression to the 'iceberg principle.' "I [try] to eliminate everything unnecessary to conveying experience to the reader," he explained in that initial interview (Plimpton, "The Art of Fiction") and elsewhere, so that "the reader... will have a feeling of [what has been kept absent] as strongly as though the writer had stated [it]" (Hemingway, *Death* 192). The six-word story pursues this principle of writing to its most logical and yet its most radical extreme, distilling Hemingway's creative theory into fewer words than he himself used to express it and putting the theory into practice at the same time. So when a story that so closely adhered to his principle somehow came to be written, there emerged a backstory which held that Hemingway himself wrote it in order to demonstrate the power of his principle. The result, of course, is that a story that does not belong to Hemingway has today captured incredible public attention at the expense of the stories he actually wrote, and the anecdotal story of his writing it has stoked the public imagination in a way that his own exploits once did but have not done in a long time. His entire body of work, it seems, has become both represented and overshadowed by a story that is nowhere to be found in his pages. How ironic, and how finally tragic, that a man who relentlessly battled to express truth and to champion authenticity in his work should now find his efforts reduced to something as inauthentic this: six words, often praised, never written.

## Works Cited

- Drewe, Robert. 'The Short Story: Amanda Lohrey, Robert Drewe, Chimamanda Adichie.' *The Monthly: Slow TV* (May 2009): <<http://www.themonthly.com.au/short-story-amanda-lohrey-robert-drewe-chimamanda-adichie-1878>>. Web Film.
- Gorse, Anna. 'Hemingway's six word challenge inspires Sutton literature project.' *Arts Council England Press Office* (9 March 2009): <<http://www.sutton.gov.uk/index.aspx?artideid=5404>>. Web.
- Hardy, Marieke. 'Lap up literature where you find it — on TV, on posters, and even in blogs.' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (19 May 2009) : <<http://smh.com.au/opinion/lap-up-literature-where-you-find-it-on-tv-on-posters-and-even-in-blogs-20090518-bcn7.html?page=-1>>. Web.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. New York: Scribner, 1929. Print.  
 —. *Death in the Afternoon*. New York: Scribner, 1932. Print.  
 —. 'Hills Like White Elephants.' 1927. *The First Forty-Nine Stories*. London: Arrow, 2004. 259-263. Print.
- Jones, Edward P. 'PEN/Hemingway Prize Keynote Address Delivered at the John F. Kennedy Library, 1 April 2007.' *The Hemingway Review* 27.1 (May 2007): 7-13. Print.
- Kissel, Howard. 'Anecdotes About His Life as 'Papa'.' *New York Daily News* (6 May 1996): <[http://nydailynews.com/archives/entertainment/1996/05/06/1996-05-06\\_anecdotes\\_about\\_his\\_life\\_as\\_.html](http://nydailynews.com/archives/entertainment/1996/05/06/1996-05-06_anecdotes_about_his_life_as_.html)>. Web.
- Mikkelson, Barbara and David P. 'Baby Shoes.' *Snopes.com: Rumor Has It* (29 October 2008): <<http://www.snopes.com/language/literary/babyshoes.asp>>. Web.
- Plimpton, George. 'The Art of Fiction No. 21: Ernest Hemingway.' *The Paris Review* 18 (Spring 1958): <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4825/the-art-of-fiction-no-21-ernest-hemingway>>. Web.

Various. 'Life in Six Words.' *Today Programme*. BBC Radio 4 (28 June 2007): <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/print/misc/sixwordlife\\_20080205.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/print/misc/sixwordlife_20080205.shtml)>. Web.

—. 'To cut a long story short.' *The Guardian* (24 March 2007): <<http://guardian.co.uk/books/2007/mar/24/fiction.originalwriting>>. Web.

—. 'Very Short Stories.' *Wired* 14.11 (November 2006): <[http://wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/sixwords\\_pr.html](http://wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/sixwords_pr.html)>. Web.