

Feb. 3, 1971

Dear Marge:

Thanks for your letter of Jan. 27. It is exactly the sort of thing I like to receive, just as you suspected it would be. It is amazing, in view of the length of time that we have been talking, how many new and fresh things remain to be said - or at least interesting new nuances on old themes. I know you have not said just this thing before. You have whittled away in this direction, of course, but you never made just this point. Before, I think, the point was that Ernest was simply trying to get even. You know I disagreed with you on this, not because I was trying to defend the man, but because I didn't think art could be produced in this way. Polemics, perhaps, but not great short stories. I felt intuitively right about this, and yet - understood your view too and found it helpful. Now you have gone beyond this, or as Ernest would say, you have moved from algebra to calculus in your thinking, and I believe you are absolutely on the right track. Not that I think you have it exactly right yet - I'm not sure that is possible - particularly in the case of a principle - but you are much closer to the truth. The reason I don't think you are absolutely home free on your theory is that I still insist that an exquisite work of art such as "The End of Something" could not be produced purely on the generation of frustrated desire or because of a wishfulness for the way things should be. But, I repeat, it is very close. I think what Ernest wrote was a combination of what happened, what he wanted to happen (these are your two points) plus what would be artistically acceptable. I think there was some instinct in this man, an ability to write vaguely related to your own concept of automatic writing, which allowed him to know exactly what was right to write, where to stop, etc. etc. I feel that Ernest was so in the thrall of his muse that he would have sold out his soul or anybody or his right to eternal salvation in order to get something right artistically. That is the way he differed to a large degree from his literary friends, and this is the reason they were happier and he was more famous. He put nothing secondary to his art; it was not only true with you; it was true all his life; he sold out everybody, as you know, including Fitzgerald, his own parents, all of his friends, even his last wife. But I don't hate him for this. I admire him for it. He was the reader's friend, not his friend's friend. There is someone, after all, he never sold out - the reader. And that is why he lives today and why he was so damn lonely as a man. I don't admire him as a man for all this, but I admire him as an artist. Thus, as he sat there writing that story "The End of Something" he sensed that something great was happening and his own experiences and loyalties were only the initial colors in the palette susceptible to muddying and changing as the need indicated. He sensed he was saying something about a love affair, about the life and death of a town and about all things that men start bravely and then neglect and finally ignore and, finally, about the whole idea of life and how it ceases to be fun after a while. I never doubted for a moment the true facts in that story. Old Paleolithic, (Ed Palethorpe to you) told ~~him~~ me unequivocally.

that just the reverse of what happened in the story happened in real life. His theory, of course, was that Ernest was getting even for not making out because, as he said, you were "a blooming Christer". That is his unlovely phrase and I repeat it now because I think it has been disarmed by time and by consideration of the source, as the old lady said of the mule who kicked her. And all of this dodges your frequently made point that none of this is appropriate because you were after all just a child. I understand that. But then I understand men too, and their fondnesses for nymphets named Lolita - She was 12, Marge, so you needn't get on your high adolescent horse on that score. Just kidding. Don't get mad, Marge. But I must admit this is a new thought I have just entertained - I mean that nymphet thing.

But to get back to the basic theme (if I can, that is); when I first read that story I thought sure enough that Hem had had this little love affair and it was one of those summer things and that like all such phenomena, he was ready to move on to something else. He was telling a story that was philosophically true a million times. And for this reason it was a good story. Later, when I learned more about the matter, I was even more impressed with Hem because I realized he had developed that beautiful, symbolic fable not on the basis of a kind of journalistic experience as I had imagined but, quite the reverse, he had sliced far away from the facts as they actually occurred. I realized then, as you have just said, that he drew his picture on the basis of this image of himself and all handsome promising young men who leave a wake of writhing broken hearts in their trail. All his life, Ernest had this self image, as I suppose all of us have, and this is what he dealt with in his art. He was just the opposite from the school of realism boys who draw life just as she is. Hem, it seems to me, would bend anything to conform with this picture and the tool he used to achieve his effect was a ~~mindless~~ kind of mindless genius sense that allowed him to judge what effect he was achieving. In the final analysis neither the actual facts (1) or the image (2) were as critically controlling as the feeling he had for the picture he put down (3) - the art of it. I've always thought he had a kind of weegy board brilliance about this. To me he was one of the few who served as a kind of poltergeist of mankind, weaving away with facts (1) and desire (2) to achieve a kind of inevitability that I have found in no other short stories that I have read. That's the word, Marge, he would bow and scrape before the goddess of inevitability and this was his crowning gift after all I think.

So you can see how happy I was to have your fine letter to allow me to start brooding about these things again.....It's been mean cold here and we are sick and tired of it. Ruth says, damn, let's go to Daytona Beach next year, and I grunt, and wonder. I love this freighter business because it tells me how alive you are (as if I didn't know) But I must keep your location straight somehow. Harold and Barbara Loeb are in South Africa as usual visiting her folks. He seems very fond of me considering I am addicted to the man who butchered him in THE SUN ALSO RISES. We do have a good relationship though. A couple of my Bill Smith pieces that appeared in the Conn. Review are coming out in a book in a few months but I know not more than that. There will also be something in that I did on Donald Ogden Stewart. Do you remember him? I saw him in London...We keep on with our books. Fun to buy, dreary to sell. Ho hum.