

GREAT WORKS OF WESTERN LITERATURE

By Mark Bourne

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EXHAUSTED, JESSUP SEES THE change as it happens this time. On page 1548 of *The Experience of Literature*, 3rd ed., in the chronological listing of the works of Ernest Hemingway, the title *The Old Man and the Sea* materializes in crisp, black letters. Other words on the page crawl away to make room for the new addition. Jessup flips through the dog-eared ricepaper pages to the essay “Papa and His Time” by Prof. E.C. Gwaltney, Ph.D. Jessup’s margin notes and underlinings from college are still barely legible as faded pencil graffiti. Then there it is, appearing in a newly vacant part of the page: “After the publication of *The Old Man and the Sea*, a nearly flawless short novel, Hemingway was awarded the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes with a promptness that suggested an overdue recognition.”

The anger bursts within him more explosively than last time, and Jessup flings the book at the shelves lining one wall of his cramped apartment.

“It’s mine!” he cries for the thousandth time. “Fucking damn it!” He stares at his word processor’s glowing screen. Blank. No point in searching through the hard drive’s files. Sour acid rises from his stomach.

His latest work — another product of solitude, missed meals, and passion — is gone. Like the others, *The Old Man and the Sea* has been erased. No, not erased. Stolen.

Jessup kicks savagely at the books on the floor and bellows like a trapped animal. He unbars the door, yanks it open, walks stiffly down the dim hallway, and emerges into the night’s cold, gray rain. The wet pavement sucks up the street lamp’s oily halo, leaving no color in Jessup’s view. From an open window, a radio blares. On the Sol Network, *His Radiance* is announcing another decree to suppress the latest uprisings on the west coast.

Jessup pounds the iron grating. The door behind it opens an inch. A tired-looking eye peers through the taut security chains.

“Whoizzit — Jessup!”

The door closes and Jessup hears the chains being unlatched. There is a moment’s pause. Alya always thinks she looks like shit in the morning, so Jessup knows she is combing her fingers through her short, brown hair. The door opens. She unlocks the protective gate and pulls Jessup, shivering and dripping, into her living room.

“What’re you doing out in this weather? What time is it?” She glances at the

clock near the shrine. Two thirty-six. "Sraosh and Rashnu!" she swears. "What's wrong.? You want some coffee? Dry yourself off, at least." She goes into the bathroom, then returns with a heavy towel and a bathrobe. The towel smells of her favorite perfume. She helps him remove his soaked shirt and pants. He puts on the robe. Alya takes his hand and guides him to the couch.

"You shouldn't be out tonight," she says, heading for the kitchen. "The Guard are ready to shoot anything that moves."

"It happened again." Jessup says it so softly he wonders if she heard it. She responds with the sounds of something being put into the microwave. A minute later, she comes out with a cup and saucer.

"Careful. It's hot." The coffee tastes awful, and she chuckles at the look on his face. "Yesterday's leftovers. You get the good stuff only when you call first. What happened again?"

Jessup lets the cup warm his palms. "You know that novella I've been working on? About the fisherman.?"

She shakes her head. "No."

Please, not again. "You read it last week. Said it was the best thing I've written yet."

"I haven't seen anything of yours in months." She sounds hurt. "You won't let me."

"But I made you read it. You said it moved you." Forget it. It's all been changed. Again. "You promised me you'd remember."

"No. I don't know what you're talking about." Her sincerity tempers his frustration.

"The Old Man and the Sea?" His voice is without hope.

"What about it?"

"Who wrote it?"

"You were the lit major." She answers his glare with a puzzled expression. "Hemingway did. Everyone knows that."

Jessup sighs. It's the same every time. Stolen, like the others.

He looks hard at her. "The Metamorphosis."

“What?”

“Who wrote the fucking story?”

“Kafka. Franz Kafka.”

“Waiting for Godot.”

“The play? Oh, wait. It’s been a while. . . Samuel Beckett. What’s this all about?”

They’ve had this conversation before. But of course she doesn’t remember. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”

“My favorite poet. Eliot.” She looks at him. A shadow of worry, or fear, washes across her features.

“Jessup.” She touches his arm. “What’s this all about? Are you all right? You’ve been working too hard.”

It’s pointless. He has explained it all to her before. But “before” is obviously a relative word. Twice now, he has told Alya everything, every absurd, unfair detail. But with each theft everything changes. So he tells her again.

For the past year or so, ideas for new stories or poems or novels have poured into him as if he were a wine glass filled to overflowing. They appear in his head complete and whole. He merely releases them through his fingers, the way Mozart envisioned entire symphonies before transcribing them into corporeal existence on paper. Just last week, when he showed her his latest work-in-progress, he told her how wonderful it felt to work on a piece that he knew was something special. Work? The words flow from his fingers as if he were simply taking dictation. And often, as his body aches with fatigue, tingly inner voices whisper encouragement and suggestions in his mind. A writer’s subconscious editor at work loud and clear. It used to take weeks just to finish the first draft of a short story. But now —

“They practically write themselves,” he says, laughing, but feeling cold and frightened all the same.

She listens as he speaks — again — of muses and inspired creation. She grows frightened when his fists beat viciously at the air over his head and he lashes out at forces he cannot name. Someone, something is helping him create beautiful, inspired work — prose, poetry, drama. Characters and scenes appear in his dreams. Faint voices tell him what a fine writer he is. Each new piece is the most fulfilling work he can imagine. But each time, after he types that final period, then slumbers in contented exhaustion, something takes his work from him. And gives it to somebody

else.

No matter that somebody lived years or centuries before Jessup was born. It doesn't even have to be a single person or time on the receiving end. Two of his fantasies, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey*, are now scattered like seeds across centuries and continents, sown into the cultural loam of lands and languages that to him are totally alien. Three days after *The Odyssey* vanished from his screen, he discovered a tattered Penguin Classics edition in a used-book store. It claimed that, as with *Gilgamesh*, no one really knew how Homer's seminal tale originated. Jessup threw up in the bookstore aisle.

Nobody even remembers seeing his original manuscripts. History is being cut and pasted, and in an act of cosmic irony or bad humor, he's the only one who can see the edits.

Is he the only one so chosen? Is history being rewritten in other ways by other hands? If so, who would know it? Maybe there are dozens, hundreds of Jessups out there, doing the editing and revising and the whiting-out. The typing pool of the gods. Ha!

While writing *The Old Man and the Sea*, he recognized Hemingway's style on the growing stack of pages. He was proud that he could capture the clean prose of the man who wrote *The Sun Also Rises*. Last week, in bed, Alya told him that if Hemingway had written Jessup's "wonderful fish story," the old fart probably would have won that Nobel Prize after all. (That was before it was taken from him, so of course she does not remember saying that.)

By then, though, he had convinced himself that the thefts were real, that he was not insane. So, after saving the file for the last time, he refused to sleep, even though his body fought him for it. He opened an old anthology from his college days and, exhausted, he saw the change as it happened that time.

"I'm tired of being the ghost writer for the universe," he says quietly. He cries himself to sleep while Alya strokes his hair. She wonders if she should call a doctor.

After a while, she reaches for the TV's remote control and switches to the news channel. Even with the sound low, she can tell what is happening. Dark-hooded Reformists are shot as they pull a Sun off a neighborhood temple. One of the Guard tells the camera that His Radiance should nuke the whole movement and let "the big M" sort 'em out. Alya looks at Jessup, asleep with his head on her lap. He mumbles something unintelligible, and stirs fretfully. Poor, sweet, paranoid lover. Drunk, he once told her that he wanted his writing to change the world. Alya clicks off the TV with a grunt of disgust. No wonder he cracked.

JESSUP IS awakened by the sound of bullets shattering glass. Alya is on the floor,

huddled behind a bookcase. For an awful moment, Jessup imagines she is dead.

“Alya!”

She turns her head and presses a finger to her lips. “Sssh!”

He listens. There are screams outside. The house across the street. A man sobbing hysterically. A woman shouting. The piercing clap of gunfire. Running footsteps. Silence.

“What’s happening?” he whispers.

“I don’t know. The Guard. Maybe a street gang. Or Reformists. How the fuck should I know?”

They listen, and after a while she crawls to the window and peers between the curtains. Be careful, he wants to tell her, but the words are brittle in his throat from fatigue and fear.

“Shit,” she whispers. “The neighbors. There’s a Reformist symbol burning in their yard. He was a priest.” She stares through the glass a long time, then says “Shit” again, as if punctuating the world.

“Alya.”

She comes to him and he embraces her, comforts her, kissing her slowly on the mouth and across her neck. She joins him on the couch and for a time the world just isn’t there anymore.

Afterward, they share each other’s warmth and he listens to her breathing. She smells wonderful.

“Remind me,” he says, nuzzling her neck, “to tell you about the dreams I had tonight. Weird.”

She smiles at him. “Was I in them?”

He isn’t sure. There were so many. . .characters. “Maybe. There was a woman, a mother. She—” But the images are fog now, and don’t make sense to his wakeful mind. “I don’t remember.” He shrugs. “Just dreams.”

She looks wistfully toward the window. Her smile fades, and near her eyes are tiny lines he’s never seen before. “It’s times like this when I wish I were religious.”

“Why?” he says. “You never use the shrine. It always looked lost in your living room.”

“It belonged to my parents. They were Orthodox through and through. They believed there was a purpose for everything. That everything was supposed to be as it is. That’s a comforting thought.”

“Of course it is. That’s what religion’s all about.”

“I outgrew all that before I went to college.” The crack of distant gunfire pulls her eyes to the window. “They never really forgave me, I think, though they never said so out loud. Sometimes I regret not believing everything I was taught at temple. It made the world understandable.”

“Is that why you studied comparative religions? To appease your parents? Or to rebel against them?”

“Both.” She wraps her arms around his back and pulls him close. She grins. “They’d never forgive me for being naked next to an atheist.”

“Agnostic. That’s an atheist without the strength of his convictions. Kiss me.”

Later, she sits up and looks at the narrow part between the curtains. “It’s almost dawn. It should be all right now.” She stretches her limbs— delicious! — and runs her hands through her hair, subconsciously arranging every beautiful brown strand.

With the remote, she thumbs on the TV. Cartoons. She leaves the sound low, then pads to the curtains and opens them a little. The earliest light of morning flows over her body.

He can’t help himself. He remembers a poem he wrote for her after their first weekend together. “A thing of beauty is a joy forever,” he says, putting his soul onto every word.

She turns and laughs good-naturedly. “That’s corny, but sweet. You’re lucky I like Keats. Thank you.” She blows him a kiss.

The anger builds in him again. He fights it down. Hot burning damn it! That poem was among the first stolen. Why can’t that be a dream? He grips the arm of the couch so tightly his muscles ache.

Alya’s expression is changing from pleasure to concern when her left eye explodes and the back of her head blows off like a piece of eggshell. Pink and red globs spatter the wall behind her. The rest of her body, thrown back by the concussion, slaps the wall and folds doll-like into a sitting position, propped up against the shrine. Redness spews from what used to be the right half of her face,

speckling the carpet and the shrine. A sleet of glass rains down onto her.

He never heard the bullet. He does not feel the tiny shards cut into his body. He only sees what's left of Alya opening up and spilling across the other side of the room. An emptying bag of blood.

As he screams, something slides through the jagged tear in his mind.

He doesn't hear the door burst open with the force of a huge metal-tipped boot.

The soldier gags and cups his hands over his nose and mouth. He props the door open wide, letting a chill breeze push in. Jessup ignores him. This last chapter is going really well. Wild, weird stuff from those dreams. A big ending. Part of him knows his body is hungry, and his flesh hunks everywhere, especially his hands and arms. His fingers feel like sausages. His bowels emptied out long ago. But it's been going well for three days now.

His numb fingers must be on autopilot, the words pour out so easily. This is his favorite work yet. Not as smoothly polished as the others, but something liked it as soon as it came to him. It's time to really shake things up, the whispers told him, with a faceless smirk. How audacious, how ballsy can you get? Jessup laughed and laughed, and the familiar tingle in his head nodded and told him yes indeed it was a fine idea and we should get on it right away, you betcha, no time to waste. Do it. For Alya.

Alya. Now where'd she go? Must thank her for letting me borrow her library to research those obscure, old myths. Wonderful woman. She's around here somewhere. Left the TV on. She must be cooking something new in the kitchen. Smells interesting. Who let the flies in?

The soldier has been saying things to Jessup. Shouting at him, punching him on the shoulder with his pistol. Jessup wishes he would go away. Can't he see I'm busy? Must wrap it up soon. There's very little space left on Alya's hard drive.

The crackle-squawk of the soldier's radio interrupts Jessup's furious typing. Damn it! The soldier is annoyingly distraught about some Reformist wacko holed up in a house on Victor Street. Musta shot the victim (female, dark hair, age unknown) during the trouble three days ago, then been living in her domicile ever since. Sick, twisted shit, the soldier says. Goes to show what His Radiance has been sayin' all along.

A proper ending—great stuff! — slips into Jessup's head, so he resumes typing while he thinks: they really should catch that guy. It's a mean world out there.

From the TV, a fanfare trumpets His Radiance's emergency address call.

Jessup is too busy to look up, but he listens while he types. From the corner of his eye, he notices the soldier snap to attention, like a leashed dog yanked to alertness. The bald, gold-wreathed head of His Radiance speaks sonorously from across the room.

He tells Jessup and the soldier about the glory that is Mithraism and its growth since the days when, almost two thousand years ago, it prospered unrivaled among the Roman Legions. No false god could stop the rise of the Unconquered Sun.

But now, a fanatical cancer of unbelievers has forced His Radiance to take sad, but necessary action. The Air Guard has launched a crusade against Reformist hives on two continents. Proceed to your temple shelters immediately, he says. His headdress sparkles beneath the studio lights. From my fortress-city beneath Rome, the arms of Mithra are striking out to remove our enemies. Just moments ago, the ancient, poisonous Library of Alexandria was annihilated once and for all by the valiant nuclear strikeforce. Consumed by fusion's holy fire. The power of the Sun.

"The power of the Sun," parrots the soldier.

Not with a bang, but a whimper, Jessup once wrote. He snorts to himself. At least he won't be blamed for getting it wrong.

His Radiance speaks of duty and vigilance and the coming times of strength and sacrifice. Between keystrokes, Jessup taps the remote's Off button. He looks up to see His Radiance reduced to a tiny star on the screen, then a pinprick, then blip! Gone. There. Much better. Where is Alya? She'll love this latest work.

The soldier pivots, hoisting his gun to Jessup's head.

Though the new work is retd with contradictions and inconsistencies, Jessup is told he can't fuss over details. But it'll be obvious that this one was cranked out in a hurry. That's all right, whispers the force guiding his fingers. You did fine work. This do the trick.

Jessup sighs wearily. Too bad there's no time for a second draft.

Sunlight pools on a dark clump on the floor across the room, but before he can get up to investigate, his view is blocked by the gaping mouth of a gun barrel. He places his hands back on the keyboard, watching the soldier's finger curl around the trigger. Jessup calls up the title page and smiles with quiet satisfaction. Perhaps this fellow would like to be its first reader. He looks up at the soldier and laughs. No, the moron probably can't even spell "New Testament."

The gun barks fire as Jessup hits the Save key.

He doesn't see the change happen this time.

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When Mark Bourne sent us this story, he added in his cover letter, “I hear that every writer feels compelled to write a ‘writer story.’ Here’s mine.

“Great Works of Western Literature” is Mark’s second sale to F&SF. His first appeared in our March 1993 issue. He has also sold short fiction to Asimov’s Fiction Magazine.