A Comparative Study of Basic Text Worlds in Two Short Stories:
Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man at the Bridge* and James M. Cain's *Brush Fire*.

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Abstract　Ever since literary criticism emerged as a formal discipline in the 1920s, competing theories, drawn from political, racial, gender, and sexual orientation have wrestled with each other over the interpretation of works of literature. Not to be outdone, linguists, initially in the form of structuralists, schooled in the theories of Saussure, strove towards an objective assessment of the truth and meaning. Their mantle was passed to more formal competing linguists: the stylisticians, and, more recently, cognitive linguists have turned their attention to how readers interpret texts and comprehend meaning. Linguist Paul Werth's theories of interpretation and comprehension, known as text worlds, were published posthumously at the turn of the millennium. This article examines aspects of his theory in regard to its application to two short stories published in 1930s America.

Keywords: Text Worlds, Hemingway, Cain

Introduction

Scholars of literary criticism, ever since its emergence and acceptance as an academic discipline in the early twentieth century, have sought to make a science of an art. I. A. Richards, in his seminal book *Practical Criticism*, laid the groundwork for a formalist school of theory, which came to be known as New Criticism. Critics from this school of thought espoused an analysis of texts which they believed to be more scientific and objective than that practiced by their contemporaries. In time, Richards and fellow proponents of New Criticism won the battle to make English literature a formal academic discipline. As a result of Richards and his colleagues, and to the dismay of generations of exam takers, his arguments concerning close reading of texts have formed the backbone of many British middle and high schooler's end-of-year assessments, though pupils themselves will most likely have heard little of Richards; still less of New Criticism.

Concepts concerning the scholarly study of art, much like the art itself, often find themselves in and out of fashion. The fields of politics (Marxism), gender (Feminism), sexual orientation (Queer theory), and race have produced academics and scholars who have endeavored to offer new theories concerning how literature can, and often should, be interpreted by the reader. In doing so, these scholars have made a conscious effort to interpret and break away from the objectives of dispassionate analysis promoted by New Criticism; instead, later critics have actively embraced subjective analysis and interpretation as shaped by the lens of their particular political or social bent. This is not meant to be wholly dismissive; there is undoubtedly insight to be obtained by way of updated and often unique interpretations of existing works of literature. Nevertheless, as should be clear, such subjective approaches entail the risk of confirmation bias. Scholars who actively project their own predispositions and convictions upon bodies of work and authors, risk not interpreting, but (super)imposing *their* associated beliefs, ideas, and ideology. As a consequence, there has been a tendency post the New Critic movement, to proffer analyses that move further away from works of literature.

The plethora of competing ideologies in recent decades has led to a melee amongst post-war scholars over the ascendancy and prominence of their preferred ideological perspectives. This has even occasionally resulting in peculiar interpretations: see William Cohen's notorious article on Victorian masturbation entitled *Manual Conduct in Great Expectations*. The academic response to the proliferation of competing schools of criticism, and associated loss of objectivity, at least amongst those who eschew ideology, has perhaps predictably, not emerged from a renewed interest in New Criticism, but from the field of linguistics. Linguists have, of course, since the inception of the subject as a formal discipline under the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure, sought to develop methods of objective analysis of both the form and function of literary texts. The student of literature, although unlikely to be familiar with most linguistic concepts, will nevertheless be more familiar with linguistics in the form of *structuralism*, under which such scholars including Roland Barthes and Claude Levi-Strauss demonstrated analysis of meaning by scrutinizing short stories and, in the case of the latter, mythology. By way of structuralism, then, the vocabulary of linguistic semiotics, the study of signs and signifiers, entered the lexicon of the literary critic.

In the 1950s and 1960s, coincidentally around the same period that structuralism was gaining appeal amongst the French scholars, dedicated linguists (as opposed to literary critics) began taking an

interest in literature, and especially poetry. This contrasted with the study of prose favored by structuralists like Barthes, or Levi-Strauss, explorations into the construction and function of myths. This new school of linguistic critics, inspired by Russo-American linguist Roman Jacobson's 1960 essay *Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics*, ascribed stylistics to the name of their branch of linguistics. The emergence of stylistics necessitated an ideological break from structuralism, and in this way the structuralist and stylistic schools of theory differ. For instance, where structuralists emphasize analysis founded on the principles of semiotics, stylisticians focus on concepts of literary discourse. In short, the stylisticians have more in common with the objectives of New Critics in as much as they aspire to objective analyses of texts. Predictably, the interpretations of stylistic analysis have been highly controversial, even within the movement. Notorious critic Stanley Fish remarked in a 1980 paper that stylisticians made the fundamental mistake of over-interpreting their analyses and attributing their own narrative to texts when provided with insufficient evidence. Nevertheless, in keeping with the stylisticians' broad objective of applying linguistics as a tool of objective literary study, this article will incorporate aspects of a relatively new field of research, cognitive linguistics. This paper will comprise of a comparative analysis of two short stories by famous American authors: 1930s Depression era *Brush Fire* written by the hard-boiled writer, war correspondent, and reporter, James M. Cain, and 1938's *Old Man at the Bridge* by Ernest Hemingway, likewise writer, journalist, and correspondent.

The Critics' Challenge: Comprehending Texts

As mentioned in the previous section, one of the primary tenets of the New Critic movement was the objective interpretation of literary texts. When undertaking the process of interpreting a text, the scholar was encouraged to disregard his or her own partiality, and to make assertions with evidence itself sourced from within the text. Likewise, cognitive linguists pursue this broad objective, however, in contrast, the New Critic misses a vital introductory step on his path to a full and correct interpretation of the text. That is to say that the cognitive linguist desires to understand *how* and, furthermore *demonstrate* the process by which the reader can make assertions regarding his interpretation. A student of cognitive linguistics will question himself regarding the process of comprehension, for example he may ask: "*How do we put together a complex utterance in order to express particular concepts?*" or "*How do we make sense of complex utterances when we receive them?*". That same student, being diligent, will know that the answer to those questions lies in a blend of cognitive grammar (Langacker), frame semantics (Filmore), conceptual blending (Fauconnier and Turner), and metaphor (Lakoff). Let us therefore examine an example of cognitive linguistics being exploited to demonstrate how we analyze and attribute meaning to texts.

One of the prominent scholars of cognitive linguistics at the end of the millennium was Paul Werth, professor at Lancaster University. During the 1990s, Werth attempted to form a unifying structure of the process of understanding which, while incorporating aspects of the above-mentioned main tenets of cognitive linguistics, would be able to explain how readers can make sense of texts. He referred to this theory as *text worlds* and his paper on this subject matter was assembled by his colleagues and published posthumously in 1999. According to Werth, then, just how does the reader comprehend his any given text? According to text world theory, there are two main aspects of a text which a reader implicitly understands when he begins comprehension: these are formal textual signals showing the function of the expression they are joined to, known as deictic words. Deitic words function to point or show direction, which includes movement through space and or time. Additionally, the reader looks for words with various semantic connections: these expressions can relate either to each other, or the background of the text. Werth (1999) refers to these expressions explicitly as *world building*.

Fundamental Constituents

According to Werth's theory of comprehension, a reader of any text will begin the step-by-step process of comprehension by searching for the components that constitute the text and which will eventually form a mental image or impression. These signals and connections are as follows, in no particular order. To begin with, the reader will scan a text for markers determining temporal and spatial progression: these markers include such adverbs and prepositions as: *firstly*, *to conclude*, *above* and others. In addition, the reader will then need to decide to which entities are being referred; this step being indicated by determiners including: *one*, *such*, *this* or *they*. The next step is to look for conjunctions which establish the relationship between sentences: *however*, *moreover*, *therefore*. Finally, the reader will consider the relationship between the speaker(s) and what he or she is trying to communicate. This process is indicated by employing adverbs related to opinion such as: *personally*, *frankly*, and *actually*. This process of mental image creation forms the basis of the comprehension of a text, that comprehension attained being a process of making sense of the word items, their reference to the world built up within the text, and that of the self-referential world which is itself constructed by the text. The necessary use of deictic words forms the grammatical syntax upon which the reader can assemble the semantic connections which illustrate and serve to create a world within the reader's mind. The world of the text may be static or include

movement, either spatial or temporal, which is communicated to the reader in deictic terms and, furthermore, the use of prepositions including *from, to*, and in the case of temporal movement, *until*.

The function of deisis is discussed by academic Joanna Gavins, in her 2007 book *Text World Theory: An Introduction*. In her book , Gavins explains deictic information as words which define the spatial and temporal relationships around a focal point which she calls the *origo*. Resembling a camera lens taking a photograph of an action sequence in process, the origo nevertheless has the advantage of being even more explicitly referential. While a single shot from a camera may neither inform the viewer of what events preceded nor what was to follow, the origo is supplemented by deictic information which informs the reader of the process of the discourse.

Paul Werth, in his book *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse*, published posthumously in 1999, takes the opportunity to codify constituent elements within the world of texts. He defines these as: time, place, protagonists, characters, sub-characters, relationships, qualities, participants, and other entities. Thankfully, these definitions are largely self-explanatory, though a distinction should be made in the definition of participants. To give correct context, participants should generally be the entities separate from the literary world of the text. In basic terms, the participants may be considered to involve the reader and writer. As an illustration of textual signals and world building semantic connections, consider this excerpt from Hemingway, per Werth:

> "Dick Boulton came from the Indian camp to cut up logs for Nick's father. He brought his son Eddy, and another Indian named Billy Tabeshaw with him. They came in through the back gate out of the woods, Eddie carrying the long cross-cut saw. It flopped over his shoulder, and made a musical sound as he walked. Billy Tabeshaw carried two big cant-hooks. Dick had three axes under his arm.
>
> He turned and shut the gate. The others went on ahead of him down to the lake shore where the logs were buried."

In this illustration I have provided a graphical schema of the deictic information (inner circle) and world building connections (outer circle) in an excerpt from *The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife* (Werth 52). As can be seen, in relation to Hemingway's short story and the textual signals, world building elements form a considerable part of the short passage. We can also infer that, due to the extensive use of the definite article *the*, Hemingway exploits the technique of backgrounding certain elements with the effect of making them a permanent and unchanging (stationary) part of the scenery. With regards to the deictic elements of the passage, the reader can understand that the world described involves (spatial)

movement amongst the characters and scene, as evoked by phrases such as *out of*, *through*, and *down to*. Furthermore, we can see that the deictic information relates to action within the narrative, that it is assertive, and from the participant of the reader represents a spatial and temporal approach to and departure from the origo (Gavins).

Figure 2 illustrates Hemingway's use of deictic information to provide spatial and temporal information in relation to the reader's origo (∅). From the perspective of the reader, the action is taking place just after Eddy and Billy's arrival into the scene, and slightly before we are given a description of Eddy, and the implied purpose
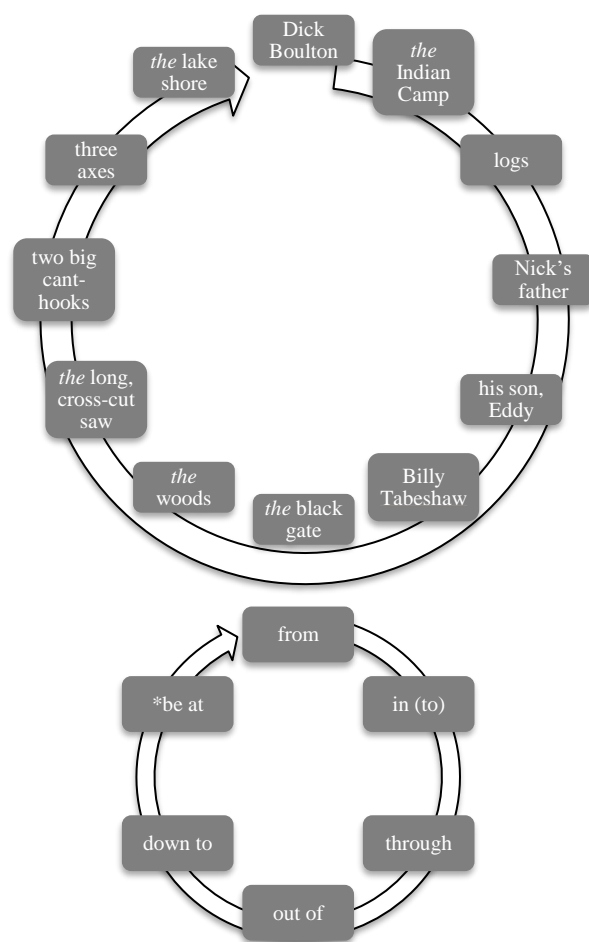
Figures 1a &1b. Deictic and Semantic Elements

as to why he is here (that is, to cut logs).

Interpreting Worlds

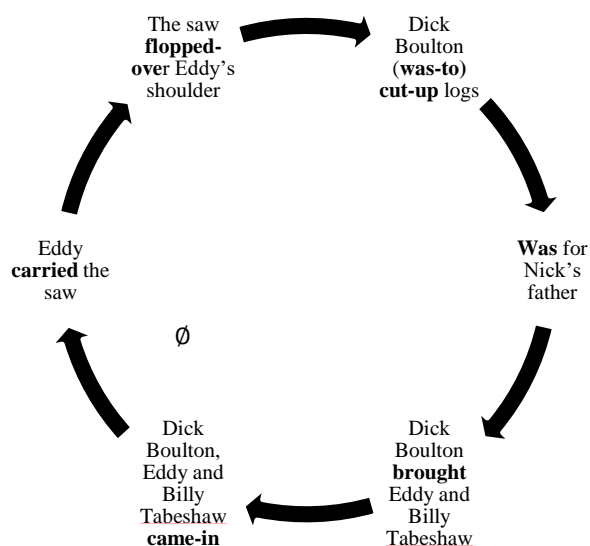Even when provided with adequate deictic and semantic

Figure 2. Deictic Information Conveying Movement

information, it is necessary for the reader to then interpret how he should construct the world. Werth gives examples of inference which may be used in interpretation. The first type is deductive inference which relies on the relationships between the propositions: thus, from the above excerpt we can infer that if Billy Tabeshaw is an Indian, there must be (including Billy) be at least two Indians. Another type of inference is abductive, which inclines itself to be presumed rather than acknowledge strict entailments. Abductive inference requires (discourse) world knowledge, and enables us to conclude that either Dick, Eddy or both are Indians. The final technique for constructing meaning is through the vehicle of metaphor, which by way of semantic connections, transposes and merges disparate worlds into others. The relevancy of metaphor to interpretation is widely discussed by Lakoff, who asserts that the metaphor is constructed from a composite of source and target domains. We can see that in the above example, per Werth that Hemingway uses the language of containers; hence the "gate" functioning as a conduit or passage between the world of the Indian community and that of the white man's world (the doctor in the story).

Hemingway's Worlds

Let us consider another example from Hemingway: his short story, *Old Man at the Bridge*, published in 1938, was based on an earlier news dispatch of an episode during the Spanish Civil War where he was working as a correspondent. The subject of the story is a seventy-six-year-old man, who, along with Hemingway, is at an improvised crossing on a river (likely the Ebro) on the road to Toledo. When questioned, the old man reveals that he is from San Carlos, and has been instructed to leave his home by the army because of artillery fire. From this information we the reader can infer that he is a possibly a refugee fleeing the Balearic island of

Ibiza. For historical accuracy, this would place the year of the episode to 1936, which marked the period when Franco's Nationalists succeeded of taking control of the Ibiza. The island had previously been a republic for much of the 1930s, and before that a French protectorate. Let us consider this quote, and the subsequent diagram listing the deictic and world-building semantic connections:

"An old man with steel rimmed spectacles and very dusty clothes sat by the side of the road. There was a pontoon bridge across the river and carts, trucks, and men, women and children were crossing it. The mule-drawn carts staggered up the steep bank from the bridge with soldiers helping push against the spokes of the wheels. The trucks ground up and away heading out of it all and the peasants plodded along in the ankle deep dust. But the old man sat there without moving. He was too tired to go any further." (Hemingway 57-58)
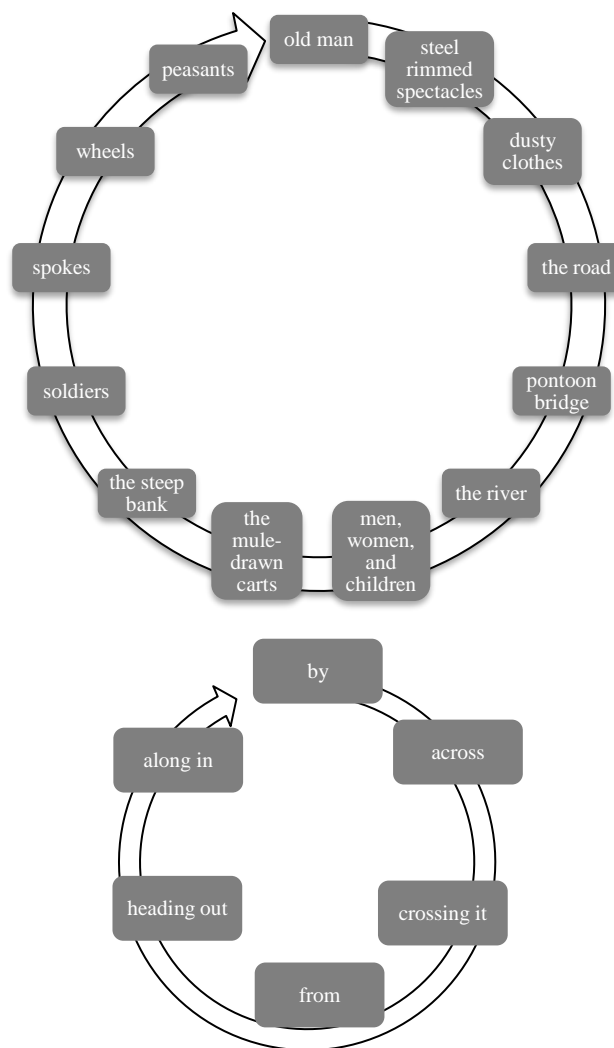

Figure 3a & 3b. Deictic and Semantic Connections in *Old Man at the Bridge*

Hemingway's description of the world of the old man contains an extensive use of semantic and world building elements, as might be expected for a story based on a news report. If we consider the constituent semantic elements of text worlds, Hemingway's use of place is fairly specific "the river" (presumably the Ebro); "the road", which we learn leads to the city of Toledo and thenceforth that the soldiers will remove to Barcelona; we are also provided with a statement as to the quality of the river "the steep banks", and that of the road "the ankle deep dust". Regarding the protagonists, Hemingway describes the old man as wearing steel-rimmed spectacles, which could imply that they are of military origin; the man's clothes are also described as "very dusty" suggesting that the man – and by extension – the other refugees have been travelling far in arid countryside and dry weather. Nevertheless, the characters and relationships connecting them are subordinate to the main element of the text world, that being place. Hemingway's foregrounding of place at the expense of other world building elements is compounded him using deictic phrases conveying spatial movement, creating an impression that place and situation are but temporary. The use of the preposition *from*, in conjunction with the phrasal verb *heading out* indicates that the world of the old man is transitory, and, additionally, the river Ebro becomes symbolic of that dialectic transition from danger to sanctuary, and from death to life. The following illustration presents the text world as it is described in the excerpt.
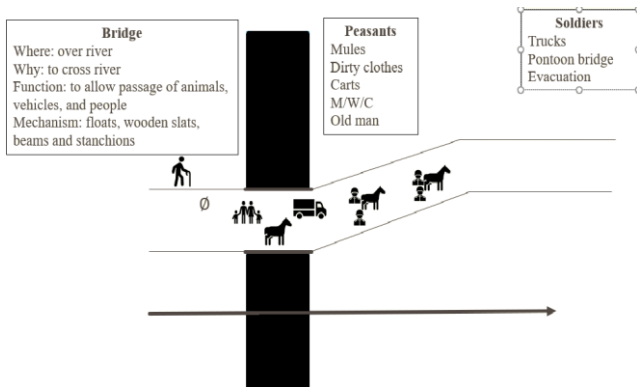

Figure 4. Text World Constituents in *Old Man at the Bridge*

In figure 4 we can see in the text world the old man illustrated to the left of the river, accompanied by the narrator (Hemingway) as our functioning focal point or origo. The people, carts, mules, and soldiers are illustrated in order of progression crossing the pontoon bridge and ascending the steep bank on the road to Toledo. The three separate boxes included what, with reference to Fillmore, are mental spaces. These operate as an illustration of the inferences which can be made by way of the combined knowledge of the participants; these being the reader and writer. We can observe that of the three separate mental spaces, the bridge is the only one which carries function. Without the bridge, the protagonists and characters would be deprived of a means to escape the Nationalist army or otherwise forced to either swim or attempt a crossing upstream. Had Hemingway desired to create an alternate impression, the text world would possibly contain more elements focusing on relationships and quality, including those of the peasants awaiting the arrival of the conquering army. In terms of reader (participant) interaction, the importance of the mental space, and particularly those with function, is that they can (and do) invoke information from the reader's knowledge of the world. Merely mentioning the word *bridge* will evoke an image of a structure crossing a body of water, or perhaps traversing a mountain pass; metaphorically speaking, the bridge is a means of negotiating an obstacle on the way to a destination. In the excerpt, the description of *bridge* is qualified: we know it is a pontoon bridge which will evoke a mental space even narrower in scope. A pontoon bridge will be makeshift, improvised, temporary, and likely hastily constructed by soldiers. Hemingway is thereby drawing upon the reader's knowledge of war and flight from disaster. Furthermore, and while Hemingway's writing style is not known for extensive use of metaphor, it can be inferred that the metaphorical function of the bridge (and river) is that of loss, or a point of no return (Caesar crossing the Rubicon in 49 BC), and the separation of life and death. Associated with Greek mythology, the separation occurs where Charon (the bridge) conveys the souls of the dead over the river Styx (Ebros) to Hades (inverted in the short story; the characters are attempting to escape from Hell).

In contrast to the symbolic function of the bridge, the spaces of peasants and soldiers do not serve any narrative function. Instead, they serve to codify semantic connections between the text world and the discourse world – that of the reader. We can infer abductively that the mules, poor clothing, and carts all belong in the general mental space of peasantry, though the word is never used in the text. Once again, and though not explicitly stated, we can additionally infer that, it is conceivable that the old man probably belongs in the space of peasants, along with the men, women, and children, rather than that of soldiers. The final mental space is that of soldiers, or perhaps more accurately, war. In this space we see examples of the world of military logistics, that of the trucks, the pontoon bridge, and that of evacuation. These semantic items together assemble a space in the reader's consciousness which should clearly explain the context in which the narrative takes place. Indeed, it is the combination of the deictic, the semantic, and the mental frames which work in conjunction to support the reader's understanding of the relationships between and functions of the entities.

Cain's California

James M. Cain's short story *Brush Fire* was published in 1936, shortly before *Old Man at the Bridge*. Like Hemingway, Cain had

worked as a journalist, and for part of his tenure at the *Baltimore Sun* he enlisted in the U.S. army and worked, again like Hemingway, as a war correspondent in Europe. In contrast to Hemingway, however, Cain's war correspondence never formed the basis of his short stories: that was to be his recording of prominent news events while he was residing in California. *Brush Fire* tells the Depression era story of a young man, Paul, who left his hometown to travel to Los Angeles, California, in search of employment. Paul joins the Civilian Conservation Corps, a public work relief program, and is assigned to fight brush fires (likely the 1933 Griffith Park fire in Los Angeles, which, as of typing, is the city's second deadliest wildfire). During a shift firefighting in the brush, Paul rescues an injured man, Ike Pendleton, who had become incapacitated due to smoke inhalation. A small crowd of witnesses gathers to celebrate the event; following this fortunate outcome, a young woman emerges from the crowd to invite Paul to take her to see the fire. He agrees to lead her from the encampment, but instead of taking her to see the fire he leads her to a small copse in between the charred landscape. It is later implied that they become lovers. Upon returning to the encampment, Paul and the woman separate, after which he walks to the edge of the encampment to admire the view of the ocean. While he is taking in the view, Ike Pendleton and the young woman (revealed to be Pendleton's estranged wife) begin quarrelling. Paul intervenes in the fight, and in the process of defending himself against the enraged knife-wielding Pendleton, Paul accidentally kills him with one of the fire shovels. Consider this scene:

"He banged sparks with his shovel, coughed smoke, cursed the impulse that had led him to heed that rumor down in the railroad yards that CCC money was to be had by all who wanted to fight this fire the papers were full of, up in the hills. Back home he had always heard them called forest fires, but they seemed to be brush fires here in California. So far, all he had got out of it was a suit of denims, a pair of shoes, and a ration of stew, served in an army mess kit. For that he had ridden twenty miles in a jolting truck out from Los Angeles to these parched hills…" (Cain 571-580)

As can be distinguished from Hemingway, Cain elects to foreground not the elements connected with place, but those other entities which *form a relationship with the protagonist*. Relationships may of course be interpersonal, except that in this excerpt, we are instead being presented with a relationship between protagonist and his possessions. These are personal, such as the items of clothing that Paul has been issued with, or other objects and tools related to his employment, also issued. These include the shovel, CCC money, and the army mess kit. Also dissimilar to Hemingway, who depicts a world of spatial
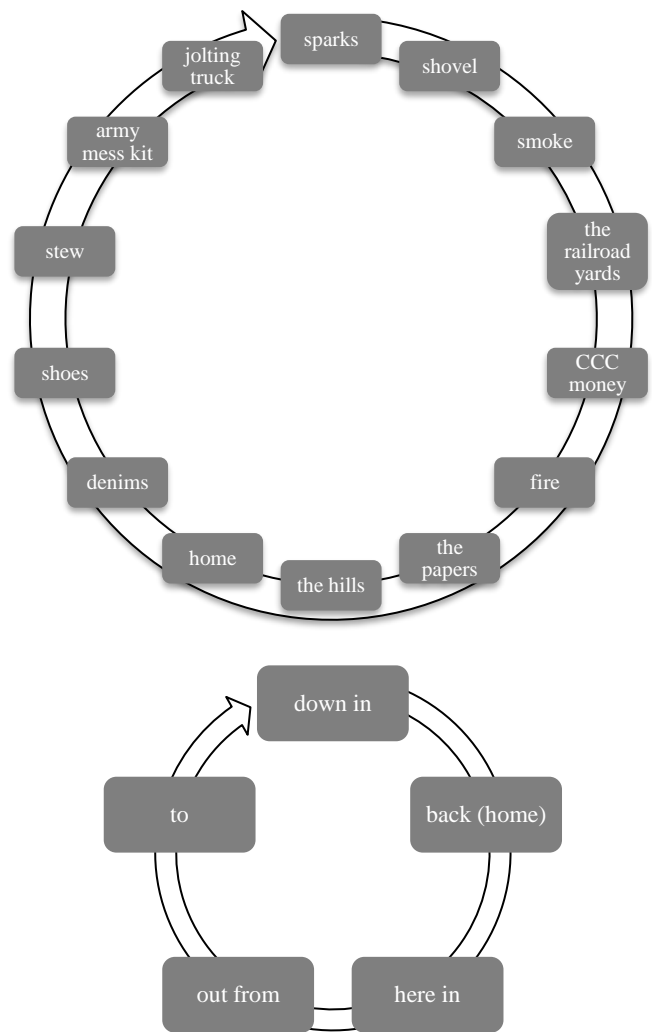

Figure 5a & 5b. Deictic and Semantic Connections in *Brush Fire*

movement, Cain's text world is not one of movement but rather stationary and descriptive, except when the protagonist, Paul, is explaining his predicament retrospectively in the form of a flashback (the *jolting truck* and *the railroad yards*). Regarding the deictic information provided, we notice that Cain is referencing, pointing to, locations the protagonist has been to at some point in the past (*home*, *out from* [Los Angeles], *down in* [the railroad yards]). Equally, this contrasts Hemingway whose use of deictic structures functions to create movement between the characters and protagonist; on the other hand, Cain instead uses these signals to reference entities which lie outside the main text world of the brush fire.
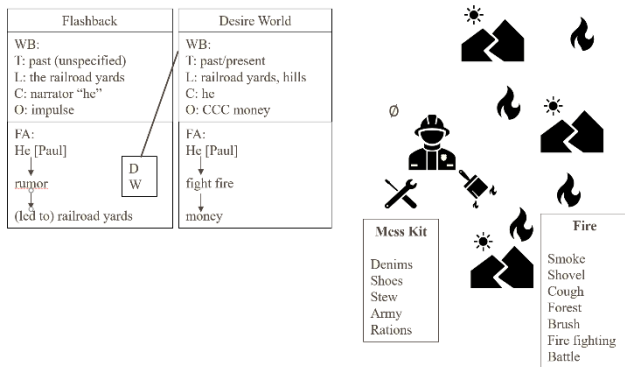
Figure 6. Text World Constituents in *Brush Fire*

In this illustration we can see the protagonist, Paul, on location in the Los Angeles hills fighting fire. As discussed previously, the excerpt from *Brush Fire* is principally descriptive, which leaves the origo located beside the protagonist and not at a point in the past. Regarding the constituent mental spaces, there are two: one related to Paul's possessions, another related to the quality of the fire itself. If we examine the qualities of the personal items which have been issued to Paul, we can see that they resemble something close to those which one might find in military encampment. Indeed, Cain's invocation of the mental space of army and armed conflict is not particularly subtle: trucks, mess kits, rations, and uniforms; all serve to reinforce the impression that the protagonist is being transported to a battle front. Equally, the description of fire is analogous to the frame of enemy, something to be beaten with a weapon (a shovel), and which can retaliate and kill (smoke, fire). The effect of these semantic and frame connections is to present firefighting as a metaphor for military service – this is further implied by the name the Civilian Conservation *Corps* (itself military terminology for a body of enlisted men).

There are several inferences the reader can make about the text world of the brush fire, both abductively and deductively. Considering the description, we are given of the location of the fire, and together with our knowledge of the other participant (Cain as a journalist) we may infer that the brush fire, if not the actual protagonist, has a factual basis. Regarding the protagonist himself, the world building connections allow the reader to infer that he is not a native of California (*back home*), that his home is likely rural, not urban (references to forests), that he is educated to an extent (reading newspapers), and that he is poor and in need of money (travelling by train to California). By means of the comparative absence of mental spaces, the protagonist in *Old Man at the Bridge* is not foregrounded to the same extent, creating an impression of loss. Regarding the old man, making substantive inferences about him as protagonist is challenging to the point of speculation.

Cain and Hemingway's writing also differs in that Cain's writing exploits what Werth categorizes as *sub-worlds* and

flashbacks. In the flashback the reader learns about the protagonist's feelings and relationships while he was still in the (implied) Los Angles railroad yards. We cannot be certain of the timescale, though we may assume that the flashback is of the recent past. Furthermore, we learn that he must have had acquaintances, or perhaps eavesdropped on fellow travelers who were also in search of employment (*rumor*). It is also apparent that he has habitually been reading newspapers (knowledge of the fires), and perhaps we can conclude he was looking for employment listings in the papers. Regarding the sub-world, it is created as an expression of the protagonist's desires. Contrasting the flashback, the desire world functions as a nexus between both the past and the present. The desire world signifies and relates to the reader protagonist's motives and beliefs, and therefore foregrounds aspects of their characters. From the desire world, it is possible to comprehend the young protagonist lack of means, and desire to improve himself and alleviate that poverty. More revealingly, it is also possible to infer that, despite the desire for material wealth, the Paul does not enjoy hard work, and certainly considers the reward for his labor to be insufficient.

Conclusion

In summary, from the New Critics at the birth of literary criticism, to structuralists, and stylisticians, literary theory and linguistics have been competing to provide working theories that will result in impartial textual analysis. Even within these disciplines, there has been discord. Cognitive linguistics is still a relatively new field of research which has nevertheless borne fruit regarding textual analysis. Text world theory, in modified form, may well be able to explain the cognitive process behind the understanding of literary texts, and the way mental spaces, semantic connections, and deictic phrases interact with each other.

This article has provided an example of a selection of the fundamental aspects of text world theory and applied them to Hemingway and Cain. It has been shown that the worlds of those authors contain semantic, world building elements, which, together with deixis, form the cognitive connections between the discourse participants. It has also been shown that the employment of these elements differs between the authors, with Hemingway preferring spatial deictic movement, contrasting with Cain's focus on descriptive world building elements and exposition of the protagonist and the relationships which connect him to the surrounding text world.

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