

## Guram Rcheulishvili: A Georgian Hemingway?

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### Abstract

Ernest Hemingway's works are often interpreted in the context of his biography as Hemingway stressed the significance of his own experience for his fiction. He explained it, "In order to write about life first you must live it" (Ernest Hemingway on Writing, 2004). The same rhetoric of the nexus of "life" and fiction is used by Guram Rcheulishvili (1934-1966) who obviously followed Hemingway's notions of literature. Rcheulishvili's short fiction is a reply to Hemingway's iconic writing style creatively worked into the Georgian literary tradition. The aim of this paper is to analyze important parallels between the short stories of Ernest Hemingway and Guram Rcheulishvili to demonstrate this relationship. The use of everyday language as well as short and simple sentences, a concise and sparse style, repetitions, intense dialogues are some of the essential traits characteristic to both writers. Themes like birth and death, war and violence, family, nature, disillusionment prove to be vitally important in their short stories. One of the significant similarities is also that both Hemingway and Rcheulishvili "place" their work mainly in "their time" so familiar to each of them. They both try to write what they know well about and doing so, they do not often employ the first-person narration (or, at least, as frequently as one could expect). Complex interconnections between the author, the narrator and the protagonist (often autobiographical) is another interesting subject to study in the short stories of both Ernest Hemingway and Guram Rcheulishvili.

**Keywords:** Hemingway, Rcheulishvili, short fiction

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## Introduction

Ernest Hemingway's literary work is often interpreted in the context of his biography as Hemingway stressed the significance of his own experience for his fiction. The same rhetoric of the nexus of "life" and fiction is used by Georgian writer Guram Rcheulishvili (1934-1960), who obviously followed Hemingway's notions of literature. He is not the only one who did so or tried to, though. As Scott Donaldson states it, Hemingway's style "was so distinctive and well known that it inevitably spawned a school of imitators" (Donaldson, 2001). However, the above mentioned young Georgian writer, though inspired by Hemingway immensely, is far from being an imitator. To put it more clearly, Rcheulishvili's short fiction can be regarded as a certain response to Hemingway's iconic writing style creatively worked into Georgian literary tradition.

It should be emphasized that Guram Rcheulishvili was a writer whose literary legacy left a significant mark upon the development of the contemporary Georgian prose. He never gained real recognition for his uncompromisingly truthful writing during his brief lifetime. This is not at all surprising though, considering the fact that his literary life lasted only four years and was interrupted by his sudden tragic death at the age of 26. Only some of his works were published during his lifetime (just seven stories, to be precise), and the collections and volumes we do have today appeared posthumously. As for the complete collection of his work in 6 volumes, it was published 42 years after the death of the author. However, recognition and fame did come and today critics agree that Guram Rcheulishvili's short stories and novellas written in crisp and deceptively simple style can be considered a pearl of 20<sup>th</sup> century Georgian literature.

The aim of this work, however, is not to thoroughly analyze Rcheulishvili's fiction, but to demonstrate some important parallels between the short stories of Ernest Hemingway (whose writing fascinated young Georgian author) and Guram Rcheulishvili in order to explain why the latter, alongside some other Georgian writers of 1950s and

1960s, is said to be crucially influenced by Hemingway's writing style.

## Two Stories by Rcheulishvili

The use of everyday language, as well as short and simple sentences, a concise and sparse style, repetitions and intense dialogues are some of the essential traits characteristic to both writers. Moreover, themes like birth and death, war and violence, family, nature, disillusionment prove to be equally vitally important in their short stories.

In this brief research I will provide certain examples showing these similarities from two stories by Rcheulishvili, *A Death in the Mountains* and *Love in Autumn*, translated into English and published in the collection of short story translations (compiled and translated by Archil Khantadze) called *12 Short Stories: A Key to the Georgian Mentality* (2009).

One of the first things that the reader acquainted with the works of both writers notices is that both in Hemingway's and Rcheulishvili's cases we are immediately plunged into the stories. This, as well as some other features characteristic to Hemingway's style (such as repetition, showing rather than telling, camera-eye technique, transforming a reader into a participating witness) can well be seen from the opening paragraphs of both stories in question.

- (1) The opening paragraph from *A Death in the Mountains*:

"Alfred Kurella was the first to **crawl** out of the tent. The sky was clear and it was cold. Down below he could see the Arkhoti River and a slope covered with wild rosemary bushes.

He slowly **began putting on his boots**; then he dragged out a Primus stove. It was small and new. The broth left over from the previous day simmered quickly.

'Alfred, we're awake too,' called his wife laughingly from the tent, then she also **crawled** out

and **began putting on her boots.**" (Rcheulishvili, *A Death in the Mountains*, 2016)

(2) The opening paragraph from *Love in Autumn*:

"Tskvito was strolling down a long melancholy street. Yellowed **leaves** were rustling underfoot as he stepped on them. A small old janitor was sweeping the **leaves** around the trees into piles and packing them into a basket. He'd already filled up the street dustbin and was emptying out basketfuls of **leaves** beside it ... dirty-faced boys and girls were playing quietly in the **leaves**. Tskvito deviated from his path and shuffled through a knee-high pile of gathered leaves. The janitor shot an angry glance at him, but then he resumed sweeping again." (Rcheulishvili, *Love in Autumn*, 2016)

As well as being plunged into the stories right away, the reader immediately notices such Hemingwayan style traits as everyday language, short and simple sentences, deliberate repetitions, all of which encourage us to search for deeper meaning beyond the iceberg top. The second of these extracts also reminds me of the opening scene from *Big Two-Hearted River* with Nick walking through "ankle high" "sweet fern".

One of the significant similarities is also that both Hemingway and Rcheulishvili "place" their work in "their time" so familiar to each of them. They both try to write what they know well about (which also explains the amount of autobiographic details in their fiction) and, while writing what they know well, they do not often employ the first-person narration (or, at least, not as frequently as one could expect). However, third person narrative does not prevent either of the writers from presenting deep insight into the character's self.

Complex interconnections between the author, the narrator and the protagonist form another interesting subject to study in the short stories of both Ernest Hemingway and Guram Rcheulishvili. To give you some idea of these

complexities in Rcheulishvili's fiction, I will return to his story *A Death in the Mountains*.

There we have a narrator who is one of the two protagonists and at the same time the author himself (or his fictional self – as according to the story the given character is a writer called Guram). Taking into consideration the fact that the story is said to be based on real events, we can definitely assume it is Rcheulishvili himself. But while the narrator, as well as the implied author of the first few pages of the story is this character (Guram) and we are indulged into the first-person narrative, there comes a sudden switch to the third person narration, which then stays throughout the rest of the story. This turning point occurs when Guram reaches the place where the tragedy of the story has recently happened and witnesses a terrible scene. There, lying among the rocks, is a dead woman (a wife and a mother), who has had an unexpected horse accident while hiking in the mountains with her husband (a German writer, who was supposed to meet Guram, a Georgian writer, that very day) and son.

As if to emphasize the unbearable horror of the scene – the dead woman lying on the ground with her shocked husband standing over her body and the motionless son kneeling beside her uttering one and the same question from time to time – "What are we to do now without mother?" (Rcheulishvili, *A Death in the Mountains*, 2016) – and the understandable desire of disconnecting oneself from such a reality, the implied author and narrator stops addressing himself as "I" and switches to the third person proper noun "Guram".

To again consider *Big Two-Hearted River*, there is a moment there as well of such a switch, but vice versa – from the third person "he" to the first person "I". This is just a single one-time switch in case of Hemingway, but overall, even without the explicit switches, the implied author, the narrator and the character usually often intermingle in Hemingway's fiction.

The switch in Rcheulishvili's case can also be viewed as another proof of the author's attempts to activate readers and

turn them into participating witnesses or observers. This goal is masterfully achieved through dialogues as well.

The art of creating dialogues is another notable aspect of Rcheulishvili's writing style which gives us the opportunity to draw parallels between his and Hemingway's works. Speaking of Hemingway's work in his book *The World Weighs a Writer's Influence*, Alan Pryce-Jones claims: "There is not a living writer in England who has been unaffected by the laconic speed of his dialogue, the subtle revelation of character that lies behind a spoken phrase" (Pryce-Jones, 1961). This "subtle revelation of character" is what most significantly distinguishes Hemingway's usage of this element.

In an attempt to sum up Hemingway's technical accomplishments in creating the dialogue, three main factors may be distinguished:

- (a) Minimum speech with maximum meaning;
- (b) The elevation of banality into art;
- (c) The blurring of distinctions between drama and fiction.

To achieve these goals, Hemingway minimized or even completely removed the controlling presence of the author's voice and employed the techniques of his non-dialogue prose: indirection, juxtaposition, irony, omission, repetition, the objective correlative, and referential ambiguity. In doing so, as Robert Lamb states it, "he met the challenge of writing modern dialogue: representing the dynamics of real-life speech" (Lamb, 2011). As a result, Hemingway gave the dialogue a completely new function, almost entirely removing the narrative commentary and authorial voice.

Guram Rcheulishvili employs dialogues in exactly the same way in his short fiction. Let's consider one of such dialogues from *A Death in the Mountains*:

"I'll go and fetch some people," Guram said, then he shook the boy's hand. The boy got up.

"What are we to do now without mother?" he said.

"What will you do now?" Guram asked Kurella.

"You mean the route? I don't know, without her we probably won't be able to go on."

"It's holiday season here, it's Atengenoba time."

"Yes, I know. She was looking forward to seeing the celebrations!"

"What was her name?"

"Elpide." (Rcheulishvili, *A Death in the Mountains*, 2016)

This extract serves as a good example of how Rcheulishvili employs pure dialogue to gradually increase inner tension of the story and to give his stories a drama-like quality, thus arousing in the reader a feeling of witnessing the scene personally. This involvement in the events of the story makes us see and feel rather than imagine.

Rcheulishvili thus employs dialogues throughout his whole writing career. The other story mentioned above, *Love in Autumn*, can also be referred to as a proof of this method so much characteristic of Hemingway. This tiny story is almost completely comprised of a dialogue between a teacher and a little boy during one of their regular lessons. And through this short, seemingly common conversation whole life and its tragedy is revealed.

"The teacher went up to the window and opened it.

"That's better, the plant will get more air," she said.

"Certainly."

"I'm at a loss what to do – it's been fading since summer."

"Perhaps it needs some fertilizer."

"We've applied fertilizer repeatedly and I've fetched an agronomist round to have a look, and I've changed the flower-pot too, but nothing seems to be of any help."

"Maybe it's grown old, teacher."

"Maybe. It's the same age as me. My father reportedly bought it as a present for my mother around the time I was born. I left Germany when I turned sixteen and brought it with me to Georgia. After I married I had a separate veranda made for it. I've been looking after it with loving care, because it's the only thing that reminds me of my homeland."

"Excuse me for asking, teacher, but have you no relatives here?"

"No relatives. I didn't even have any children. Then my husband passed away, he was a good

man, bless his soul ...” (Rcheulishvili, *Love in Autumn*, 2016)

Here, like in Hemingway’s fiction, minimal words, but the words well chosen, make the meaning deeper. The author seemingly disappears and leaves it to the reader to see and comprehend, to have deeper insight into the souls of the characters. Many of the characters themselves also follow a certain Hemingwayan pattern – they show (or at least do their best to show) a so called ‘grace under pressure’. This characteristic feature especially strongly links Guram Rcheulishvili and Ernest Hemingway, as Guram himself also considered it a man’s credo to behave with dignity and courage no matter what the circumstances were. And in a certain way he himself lived his life as a Hemingwayan hero and died like one. On August 23, 1960 Guram Rcheulishvili sacrificed his life saving the lives of some foreigners drowning in the sea.

## Conclusion

Thus, his short life and literary career ended abruptly, but Guram Rcheulishvili still managed to become one of the prominent writers of Georgian literature, whose works continue to fascinate. The influence of Ernest Hemingway’s style on his fiction is evident and significant, but at the same time Rcheulishvili’s prose is deeply rooted into the rich and unique culture and literary heritage of Georgian people.

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