

Cuba Libre

by Elmore Leonard



An Essay by Garry Victor Hill

In Elmore Leonard's *Cuba Libre* Ben Tyler, an American horse trader goes on a hero journey, one that takes him into war, not away from it. Tyler has to leave Texas as his face features on reward posters for bank robbery. He sails into Havana harbour in February 1898, two days after the American battleship the *Maine* was devastated by a mysterious explosion, then generally credited to a Spanish mine. The explosion left hundreds of American sailors dead, the American public enraged and relations between America and Spain deteriorating towards war, which the Hearst media encourages in the name of liberty, hence this novel's ironic title.

Even in 1898 others correctly believed an explosion in a boiler was the cause.¹ In 2002 filmed investigations on the submerged hulk revealed this truth.² This revelation however came four years after *Cuba Libre* was published: Leonard does not go far into the question of who or what blew up the *Maine*, but does describe some investigations and his characters provide much speculation. He gives descriptions of the explosions and what it was like to be a survivor. He does through the experiences of a marine on board, Virgil Webster, one of his ensemble cast.

Tyler's arrival has much about it that is heroically archetypal: he is the hero on horseback, the adventurer entering a disordered, menaced, oppressed land. The disorder and menace first becomes clear with the imagery of buzzards circling over the devastation of the *Maine*. This sense of foreboding then deepens with the explanatory account of the Cuban situation

¹ 'The Maine' *Wikipedia* accessed 7th December 2021.

² "Death of the USS *Maine*." *Unsolved History Series*. Shown 2002. These citation details are taken from the above article. Although this author saw this documentary, I did not take source notes at that time.

by his partner Charlie Bourke, who in some ways, notably supplying advice and displaying loyalty, acts as an archetypal donor. He tells Tyler of the *Maine*'s mysterious explosion. This makes the Americans look powerless and links them to the fighters against repression in Cuba.

Tyler, a former cowboy and outlaw, came to Havana ostensibly to sell horses to an expatriate American magnate, Rollie Bordreaux, but in actuality he supplies arms to the American-backed Cuban insurgents who are waging a guerrilla war against tyrannical Spanish rule. He soon gets involved in the successful independence fight.

Leonard concentrates on his fictional aspects more than history, but does mix history into the background. He also mixes traditionalism and a postmodernist outlook in his depiction of a war that also blended disparate elements. This brief 1898 conflict came only eight years after President Harrison declared that the frontier was over. In that same year the last battle of the Indian Wars was fought at Wounded Knee Creek. Americans soon followed their conquest of the West by the conquest of most of Spain's remaining empire: the Americans took Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines from Spain and along with Hawaii, these lands would become part of America's new empire. Yet Americans won the new empire to an extent by the same style of violence that had won the West: cavalry veterans from the Wild West, led in charges by officers with sabres or pistols. Styles of violence merged: this war was also won by bombardments from battleships and blasts from machine guns. This was not the only blending of the traditional and the modern. In attitudes the politics of idealistic nineteenth century patriotism merged with realpolitik, cynicism and obvious self-interest; characteristics so evident in American literature after the First World War.

In its broad outlines and even many details, *Cuba Libre* seems a traditional tale, yet like the war it depicts, Elmore Leonard mixes realism with mythic traditions and attitudes. Once again the hero arrives to find disorder and menace, follows the advice of donors and successfully courts the bride, after rescuing her from an inappropriate suitor. After vanquishing the villains, he helps restore order and settles down.

Despite this traditional framework, many elements of traditional tales are missing, notably the heroic altruism, loyalty, simple patriotism and obvious delineations of good and bad evident in traditional heroic war tales. Instead, *Cuba Libre* abounds in ironies and characters changing roles, taking on and discarding aspects of both the hero and the villain as circumstances they cannot control, but come into their lives, influencing them. Such changes are rare in traditional tales, where most characters have fixed roles, but are evident in such modern texts as *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *The Naked and the Dead*, *They Came to Cordura*, *Catch-22*, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, *Little Big Man*, *Wargames*, *Going After Cacciato*, *Burr* and *Blood Meridian*. In all these texts, as in *Cuba Libre*, a central character acts out much of the hero role, but others also possess heroic qualities, even if they are enemies or traitors. Among these their actions and characters show the limitations of heroism and its repressive side, which suggests links to the villain rather than opposition. *Cuba Libre* also shares with these other novels the cynicism, amorality and self-interested, complex characters common to post modernist texts.

Idealism, altruism or naïveté initially seems to motivate some characters, but these characteristics are often initially deceiving. Even when they are not, the fate of those genuinely idealistic characters shows such characteristics to be self-destructive. As in *Wargames*, *Burr*, *Dog Soldiers*

and *Blood Meridian*, the quest for wealth and power replaces idealism with most characters. The mercenary values of the post Vietnam, post Watergate era permeate this story: Leonard finds an earlier example of American duplicity, imperialism and media manipulation in an 1898 war.

This becomes evident even before the journey begins, when Tyler discusses the horse-trading and gun dealing with Bourke, who has arranged the deal. Their conversation, which starts with the approaching war, quickly dispels any idealism. Instead, it reveals cynicism about American foreign involvements and how and why writers create war stories. Tyler states that the real reason for the conflict will be to protect American interests in Cuba while Charlie Bourke focuses on how the media will profit by printing casualty lists, thereby increasing circulation. (p. 10)

Bourke quickly reveals himself to be a donor free from any belief in miracles or morality when he takes the conversation into the mixture of compassion, self-interest, foresight and mercenary opportunism which typifies not only himself, but many characters of *Cuba Libre*, including Tyler. He raises invidious possibilities for Tyler: either selling horses for the war effort or riding one into battle to kill the enemy, these being Spanish kids who never did him any harm and who have no idea of why they are fighting in Cuba. (p. 11)

This situation soon becomes even worse than it initially seems as Roland Bourdreaux, a Louisianan plantation owner, frequently resident on his lands in Cuba, soon reveals himself to be a brutal opportunist who actively supports the crushing of the insurgents because they threaten his Cuban investments. Tyler and Bourke show only a little more ideology or scruples as after musing on the approaching war's causes and the role of Bourdreaux, they then discuss merchandising, methods, dangers and profit

margins in the Cuban gun running business. The finance methods involve theft, extortion and bribery. Such acts cannot be justified as expediency in a noble cause, for when Spanish officers show interest in buying the horses, Bourke and their Cuban partner Victor Fuentes start to deal with these Spanish officers, particularly Lieutenant Teobaldo Barbón and Major Lionel Tavalera.

These two officers, who Leonard locates in the place of traditional villains, show the usual villainous characteristics of cruelty, greed, arrogance, hubris and treachery. Even so, they also live by much of the heroic code. Both uphold traditional order and are fiercely dedicated to their service, their nation and to the concepts of chivalric honour. Both are much concerned with courage and love the military life. However, their lives and how their code works show how repressive, archaic and harmful the old heroic code can be. With Tavelera, this absorption with living by the heroic code often takes the form of reminiscing over his hideous torture methods and summary executions. He sees doing this as upholding honour and order. He also initially yearns for the approaching war with America to resemble a campaign he was particularly fond of, one of Spain's wars against fanatical Moslems over a desecrated mosque. (p. 110) He dislikes the approaching Spanish-American War because of its basis in economics, not honour, and because Spain losing the approaching war can only be a certainty. He also senses how the development of the rifle and long-range artillery have changed warfare, as he does not want to be killed by a gun fired from six thousand meters away. (p. 237) In his musings to this point Tavelera sounds like a realist, but then his comments go in the opposite direction, being blatantly quixotic. Although he does not fear death, he wants to die like a knight fighting another knight in a tournament. He requests of fate only that

he have an opportunity to kill the one who will kill him and when he fails, that will be his fatalistically accepted end. (p. 237)

During his brief time in the story Barbón acts in even more dangerously quixotic ways, putting Tavalera's concept of war as duelling into practice, being a spoiled expatriate brat who continually makes trouble to show off his fighting prowess. His regular method to achieve this is by defeating those he challenges to duels. Such outmoded, quixotic heroism has its ridiculous side. Tyler laughs incredulously when Barbón challenges him to a swordfight over who will saddle a horse.

The repulsive and devouring side to the heroic ideal emerges again when Barbón explains to Tavalera, that he did not intend to kill Tyler, but merely slash his face for his lack of manners. Barbón's other duelling victims were killed in his exhibitionistic, ridiculously ritualistic duels which are performed in the city park at dawn before the statue of his queen. The opponents, who he always shoots through the heart, recall Aztec sacrifices offered up to statues of their gods. Here they are sacrifices to upholding the heroic ideal – and Barbón's ego. On hearing of Barbón's duels, the municipal chief of police, Andres Palenzula, exclaims that God should protect them from patriots. (p. 55) Despite such prayers his force is little better. They are also motivated by the repressive heroic ideal, which perpetuates exploitation of the people for a few supposed heroes and enforces a fearful, passive respect. Fuentes demonstrates why when he and Tyler talk about the Guardia. He explains that he defers to their illusions because they are considered loyal, superior and are noted for the callous devotion to duty. This combination of factors which make them dangerous and therefore best avoided. (p.54)

In their attitudes to the quixotic mentality two different cultural outlooks are in opposition. Not for nothing was a majestic statue of Don Quixote erected in a Madrid central park or that Spanish ploughmen sometimes wore unneeded swords while they worked.³ In 1830s Spanish California impoverished local Hispanic traders addressed American visitor Richard Henry Dana with all the noble courtesy of *grandees*.⁴ In his ending to *The Spanish Temper* V.S. Pritchett notes that *Don Quixote* contains everything written about Spain in other books.⁵ Gerald Brennan in his 1950 description of the mentality of 1890s Spanish *grandees*, with their contempt for work and desire for wealthy leisure and honour, could be describing the outlook and desires of Leonard's Spanish officers.⁶ The quixotic mentality, its deluded, outdated heroism and its connection to elitism permeate his work. For the Hispanic officers in *Cuba Libre* Don Quixote's preference for the grand ennobling vision over life's banalities, for living by chivalric ideals involving courage, romance and selfless dedication to service are what counts. For Leonard's English speakers realities are what count and they are more in line with Cervantes's conclusion, where on his deathbed, Don Quixote eschews chivalry and mythic stories about it as inane delusions.

³ The statue is a personal observation and interpretation of the author.

⁴ Richard Henry Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast.: A Personal Narrative of Life at Sea*. 1840. New York; Readers Digest Association, inc. 1995. p. 82. Dana gives his eyewitness account.

⁵ V.S. Pritchett *The Spanish Temper*. 1954. New Edition with a new introduction. London; The Hogarth Press, 1984. p..217.

⁶ Gerald Brennan, *The Spanish Labyrinth: An Account of the Social and Political Background of the Spanish Civil War*. 1943. Second Edition. 1950. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1971. pp. 11-13.

Interestingly Don Quixote never discusses the precise bloody and painful realities of battle or tournaments, the realists do.

As in *The Iron Heel*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Brave Cowboy*, *Catch-22*, *Blood Meridian*, *The Strawberry Statement* and *Vida*, in this novel the order that the police enforce and uphold is illusory: for all but a few they are a repressive force. In *Cuba Libre*, despite their view of themselves as heroes, the Guardia and the Spanish army enact the traditional villain's task of the destructive bully. They roam across the land, making it desolate and society fearful of their destruction, which resembles that of barbarians. They almost indiscriminately burn, plunder, kill and imprison with savage ferocity. According to Tucker by early 1898, these forces, of which Tavalera and Barbón are a part, put whole villages into concentration camps and annihilated several hundred thousand innocent victims. The concentration camps were a historic fact.⁷

This mixture of villain and hero also applies to those on the supposedly good side. Most of the heroic radical leaders are treacherous, manipulating and mercenary. Tyler, as the central character, resembles Robert Jordan of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in his situation, a yanqui adventurer amidst a Latin society in a state of revolution that descends into civil war. Like Jordan he sympathises with the more liberal and democratic side without being blind to their faults. In contrast to Jordan, he has no ideological beliefs or a consequent disillusionment to come to terms with. As a literary character he resides somewhere beyond the widespread disillusionment with radicalism and humanism which came twice to American literature, in the 1940s and the 1980s. The disillusionment and corruption that was just starting with Jordan and Robert Hearn in *The Naked*

⁷ Brennan, p.17

and the Dead has become much more developed in Ben Tyler. In his cynicism, opportunism and rebellious individuality he resembles Red Valsen, Jack Burns, in *Brave Cowboy*, Robert E. Lee Prewitt in *From Here to Eternity*, Jack Crabb in *Little Big Man*, the Stampers in *Sometimes A Great Notion* and Ray Hick in *Dog Soldiers* – all of them, like Tyler, Westerners in a world where only remnants of their Western way of life still exist. No intellectual or political believer, he sides with the rebels for several different reasons. In America he was a lone rebel exploited by the system and so dislikes exploiters; therefore, he dislikes the arrogant Spanish bullies. Despite being an outsider, he has some loyalty to America and the Spaniards imprison him and execute Burke, arousing his anger and loyalty. Ironically despite his cynical advice to Tyler, Burke's brave death helps inspire Tyler to fight against the Spaniards. With Tyler money also works as a factor: money motivates much of the action and most of the characters of *Cuba Libre*.

Several characters allow that genuine heroism might exist among the legendary heroes whose personalities are unexamined in detail. The Cuban rebels refer to their heroes José Martí, Paulina Gonzáles and Gómez. In *Cuba Libre* genuine heroism *seems* real among the stoic, patriotic prisoners of the Morro. The most salient example of this emerges in the jailer Molina's description of their executions. Here the martyrs act bravely and usually calls out "*Cuba Libre!*" just before being shot at the Castle Morro prison moat, where papaya trees grow because the martyr's blood enriched the soil. (p. 94) This actual process has obvious symbolic connotations.

This process also reveals several reasons why traditional heroism will not work convincingly in literature anymore. Except for not giving the shouted slogan Charlie Bourke dies like this and the reader knows his

motivations and that although he dies bravely, his motives and his earlier actions means that fundamentally, he cannot be a hero. Tyler claims to be inspired by the imprisoned patriots and Fuentes, who was once an imprisoned patriot, believes in and fights for the same things. He repeatedly denounces the landowners for selfishness and exploitation, pleading for social justice and freedom emotively, yet Fuentes betrays. He calculatingly deserts Tyler and their cause for money meant for the revolution so he can be an exploitative landowner. In contrast the Cuban martyrs remain heroic because they remain unknown as personalities.

Molina also functions as more of a threat to traditional heroism than any traitor or any traditional villain or even any writer cynically examining supposedly heroic motivation. In many ways he shows powerful influences eroding heroism. His description of the executions at Castle Morro shows that the martyrdoms are a process of mass production, turning men into fertiliser, not icons. Molina has been their audience and like so many individuals subjected to repeated spectacles, he becomes apathetic, fatalistic, passive and self-centred. An Americanophile and a fatalistic functionary, he tells Tyler and Burke that he expects the approaching war to be lost to the Americans. Molina does not mind, as his almost perfect English and first-hand experience will mean he can soon operate as a tour guide for the American tourists who will flock to the famous and picturesque centuries-old Morro Castle once their army wins the war that has yet to be fought. His stylised description of the patriot's executions sounds as if he already rehearses his tour guide's role. He treats Tyler and Burke almost like tourists, showing them round the dungeons, politely answering their questions, arranging visitors and telling them what they will eat and when. He even apologises for not being able to tell them when they can leave. In

those scenes set in Morro Castle this clashing mixture of Gothic, almost medieval settings in the dungeons, villainous menace and modern tourism make the heroic image extremely difficult to sustain.

In *Cuba Libre*, as in Hemingway's *Fiesta*, tourism through its artifice, self-consciousness and commercialism becomes a destroyer of the heroism (either real or constructed) it celebrates. The media operates as another unintentionally destructive exploiter of heroism in *Cuba Libre*. The well-meaning, idealistic journalist Neeley Tucker, who ironically searches for heroes to publicise, tends to destroy heroism as he finds it with his absurd and self-conscious behaviour. This becomes apparent when Tucker resides amongst the rebels, imagining how to write about offensives before they happen. Then, when he sees Tyler kill Barbón in a gunfight, Barbón has barely fallen to the floor before Tucker starts turning the shootout into a story, standing there before a dead man and his motionless killer, engrossed as he dreams up purple prose.

While being blind to his own creativity in shaping warfare and how people will perceive it, Tucker stays very aware of how other journalists and their controlling moguls behind them shape the war for the reading public. In the Havana hotel where most journalists reside he describes it as a place where they justify hotel bills through creating fabrications and rumours. (p. 56). This hotel also becomes the site where they create much of the war: Sentiment against Spain gets stirred up with invented mordant diatribes while eyewitness's accounts of atrocities are invented in hotel rooms. (p. 56). The duplicity also goes the other way: reporters do not necessarily recount real atrocities. Ironically two famous American realists, the novelist

Stephen Crane and the painter Frederick Remington, were covering the war in Cuba.⁸

Tucker and Amelia discuss one of these media elaborations, the manufactured career of the suffering heroine Evangelina Cisneros. Media magnate William Randolph Hearst creates images which also give the public something to think about, moving them towards supporting the war with Spain. Hearst's images are both sexually and sadistically laden, but also suggests purity personified in danger from the beastly Spaniards, who jail Evangelina Cisneros, a teenager of average looks, apparently for refusing sexual involvement with an alcade. Hearst transforms her into a languishing beauty, imprisoned in Morro Castle, which puts her under the shadow of death. (p. 75) Considering Molina's description of the executions there, the melodramatic cliché contains more than a grain of truth, even if further exaggerations and falsifications abound. Journalists who bribe her jailers into freeing her transform this into a daring escape. President McKinley and a cheering crowd of a hundred thousand welcome this media creation when she arrives in Washington. The American public craves its heroines and heroes, even if those who aim to win the war are more covertly cynical than Tucker.

Evangelina Cisneros and other female rebels inspire Amelia, who abandons her comfortable middle-class life to fight for the revolution, apparently against her self-interest. Fuentes and Calvo (who have themselves rapidly gone from being servile minor functionaries of Spain's repressive forces to revolutionary leaders) consider what an asset she would be if they can put her in the heroic role. Like Cisneros, Amelia will become a poster girl for the revolution due to an extent to Fuentes and Calvo, who

⁸ The frontispiece to this essay is Remington's depiction of the charge at San Juan Hill.

make her plausible by presenting her as being in the tradition of Cuban revolutionary women. (p. 157) Amelia also understands this.

They understand that the desired primal quality is sex appeal mixed with apparent purity: her military prowess is secondary. By wearing trousers and a skirt only to her knees when riding she knows how to use sex appeal. By knowing how to shoot with a pistol or a rifle she knows how to add to her mystique and increase her survival odds. (pp.158-159)

Fuentes and Calvo mistakenly think they know what motivates Amelia. When Calvo asks what she wants Fuentes replies that she wants fame. (p.159) They think they have found her hidden motivation, and can manipulate her and although Fuentes ultimately becomes her most successful user, she uses them and shapes their behaviour. Amelia, Calvo and Fuentes all do heroic things, rescuing Tyler and Virgil Webster in a daring prison raid and going on to fight in the war, but ultimately these five characters are primarily concerned with money. Greed for wealth wrecking lives is a theme as old as biblical stories. In *Cuba Libre* the lure of Amelia's ransom, apparently demanded by rebels from Boudreaux, draws several characters further away from the idealism that they once believed in: desires corrupt. They return to the mercenary aspects of their pasts.

The ransom comes to dominate the lives of those who were once interested in the causes and conflicts which lead to the Spanish-American War: it dominates the second half of *Cuba Libre*. However, as the pursuit of the ransom occurs just as the war starts and the Americans attack, the conflict and its causes loom over the characters chasing the ransom. Boudreaux's note attached to the ransom appears as not only ambiguous, but also cruelly ironic as it reads AMELIA BROWN FOR CUBA LIBRE. (p. 257) This suggests an exchange, Amelia for Cuba's freedom, but it also

recalls Amelia's false radicalism, as if she really fights for that freedom. It also recalls the executed martyrs who died shouting "for Cuba Libre" but their names and personalities remain unknown and therefore do not betray and alienate the way Amelia, Fuentes, Islero and Webster, Tyler and Calvo all do.

Amelia is not the victim she seems. She soon emerges as a temptress who dreams up her kidnapping by the insurgents. Apparently Fuente's half-brother, the revolutionary leader Islero, will pay the deprived dependents of his poor troops with the forty thousand dollars ransom her lover Boudreaux eventually pays. She reveals her reality to Tyler: she is a courtesan; Boudreaux merely serves her as the latest of her keepers. She also simultaneously works on two other men, Tyler and Islero. Through her influence on the latter, she uses the insurgents, always intending to keep the ransom money for herself. She easily wins Islero away from his revolutionary dedication and into sharing the money. Her flatteries also go to Tyler for his bank robberies, while they work on their mutual, entwining mixture of sexual attraction and venality. The way Boudreaux has swindled Tyler also provides a revenge motive and more insidiously, envy. In this novel the media, the military, the politicians and the characters all eventually reveal more layers of deceit, one below the other, than layers in an onion.

The obvious fact that there are no good guys in Westerns anymore does not change the way some fall far from a once heroic persona: Islero also intends to keep the money for himself, postponing his crucial attack on Matanzas, risking its success, so he can heist the ransom. His treachery also apparently wins over his half-brother Fuentes into supporting Amelia. Tyler then warns her that Fuentes appears fond of getting money for himself.

Virgil Webster, the *Maine* survivor from the mid-west, initially seems a simple, clean-cut patriot. This rapidly changes when Tyler offers him a cut of the ransom for his help. Webster admits to an armed robbery as a teenager. Boudreaux's chooses his bodyguard, Novis Crowe, who was once a champion fighter and "dog loyal" to deliver the ransom, but Novis dreams of running off with the money. Tavelera, riding on the same train, who watches Crowe so as to catch the kidnappers when they try to collect the ransom, also schemes to get the money for himself. This once honour-obsessed soldier dreams of how to increase his inadequate income while recalling his earlier methods of doing this in the African penal colonies. There, after starving prisoners wrote begging letters to their unfortunate loved ones, money arrived and the miserable inmates continued to starve and die of disease. While he pocketed their money. (p. 204) If he gains Amelia's ransom he can live as a grandee. (203) Osma, the brother of Tavalera's mistress, also chases after the ransom. A former slave hunter and now a professional killer, he uses his talents to track those who have the ransom. In the end Fuentes takes the money, leaving his partners and his ideology behind so that he can buy a banana plantation and become another of the rich landowners he once served, hated and fought against. The man who could verbally depict the inflicted sufferings of the peons and rebels so poignantly now boasts that he will have a youngish wife kept on the farm for sexual purposes, housework and to pick the fruit while he lazes around, the great dream of the grandees.

Leonard links the characters' attitudes and their transformation from failed idealists who retain some remnant of the old heroism to ruthless, mercenary cynics to the mercenary and hypocritical nature of the war. That serves as one point all the major characters agree on, another being that they

are all entwined in a personalised microcosm of the Spanish-American War. Others match the views expressed by Burke and Tucker. Tavalera's view initially seems to demonstrate the cheap cynicism of the traditional villain about the motives of others. He thinks that for the Americans the war is about lucrative advantages, for Cuba resembles a cow that has been supplying its conquerors with milk for four hundred years. (p. 110). Quixotically he mistakenly thinks that for Spaniards the inspiration is different: being not economic, but a matter of honour. This delusion has its place in a mixture of economics and warfare, for while soldiers are willing to die for honour, who would be willing to die over disputes about the price of sugar? (p. 110). Amongst the Americans, several express views similar to those of Tavalera. Similarly, to Burke's opinion, Webster states that American forces are there to prevent Cuban rebels taking over their country before America gets a chance to do so. (p. 36). Tucker expresses essentially the same, albeit with less cynicism. He sees that the war happened in Cuba to protect American interests. (p. 72) Rollie Bordreaux with his extensive property and investments is one such "interest." Before the war begins he maintains friendly relations with Weyler, Tavalera and other Spanish exploiters and becomes an accessory to their murders of insurgents. He makes it clear that he does not care who wins, as he will still be restfully residing at the top. (p. 73) Even so, he expects American soldiers to unhesitatingly die for his financial interests. Even many of the jailed Cuban patriots see that in the future America will replace Spain, resulting in only small positive changes within their lives. (p. 114).

Once again sometimes quixotic Tavalera applies a similar sustained cynicism to many of those Cubans and Americans fighting for independence. He accepts that some Americans are sincere in their desire for

Cuban freedom and naively utopian about what Cuba will become with peace, with no change emerging for the poor. (p. 108) Tavalera states that in the peace the Cubans and Americans will be as greedy as anyone else. (p. 108) The intrigues over Amelia's ransom clearly shows him to be right on this matter.

The betrayals of Fuentes and Islero for money, the only indigenous revolutionary leaders depicted in *Cuba Libre*, also support this cynicism, as does many of the methods the radicals use, extortion, torture, brutal murders and vandalism. In other incidents Fuentes also tells of the prostitutes trading their favours with Spanish soldiers for bullets for the insurgents and Tucker talks of Red Cross aid for starving children being pilfered and resold for cigars.

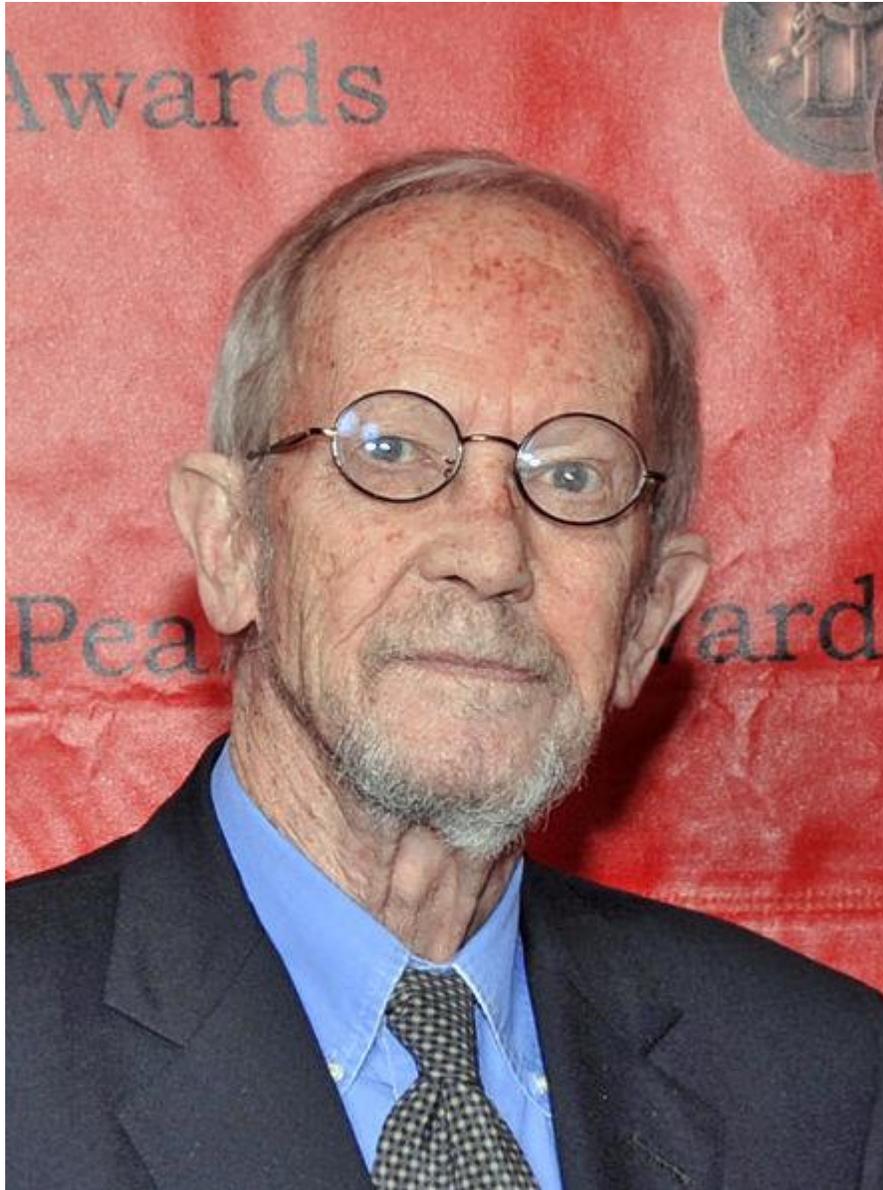
Clearly the old heroism has been exposed as being an inadequate representation and a code nobody really lives by. Yet once the ransom vanishes with Fuentes and the war breaks out, the characters return to holding on to remnants of this old heroism, giving it some reality and credibility. Both Tavalera and Webster return from chasing the ransom to doing their duty, both fight and are wounded in action. At the war's end, In the novel's final scene, all the characters present show some different aspect of heroism. Tucker remains a truth teller about the falsity and exploitation in the war. Bordreaux becomes a generous loser, forgiving Amelia for defrauding him and leaving him for Tyler. He even pays Tyler his owed wages and offers him employment. Tavalera also appears as a gracious loser, offering to shake hands with Tyler while telling him that "we" fought honourably and the conflict has ended. (p. 342)

As Tavalera was directly involved in executing his friend Burke and torturing Calvo, Tyler must reject this and does, just before Calvo arrives to

shoot Tavalera dead. For the crippled Calvo, who has been physically and spiritually broken by Tavalera, this vanquishing of the villain becomes more than revenge; he grasps at the heroic role. For Tyler, who intends to stay in Cuba and settle down on a ranch with Amelia, he is taking the role of regeneration in a land to help restore to peace.

In a novel which exposes the false and archaic nature of traditional heroism, war and order, this traditional concluding motif must be dubious, even if it remains not directly questioned. The question of what type of order will exist in the new Cuba, which has become free of Spain, but not of America, is implicit. The way so many characters made cynical comments about Cuba's future and the expected American occupation, followed by resented, corrupt governments reinforces this question. Will Tyler and Amelia rejuvenate order at a personal level by ignoring the exploitation around them so they can live happily on their ranch? If their ranch prospers will they be in the same situation as Bordreaux and therefore become an exploiter of Cuban labor like him? Or will they continue the struggle against exploitation, which will soon be a struggle against America? The novel ends with options, not a conclusion, After he sees Calvo kill Tavalera and calmly hobble onto a streetcar Tyler's last and ambiguous words are that becoming habituated to Cuba will take a strong, prolonged effort. (p. 343). Whichever option they choose, there cannot be a viable return to an idyllic, restored traditional order when the setting is Cuba in 1898.

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Elmore Leonard 1925-2013

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