
Masculinity and Hemingway's Fiction: A Study of Gender, Identity, and Social Expectations

Syed Azeem Ali¹,

Research Scholar, Department of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad,
Telangana

Dr Konda Nageshwar Rao²

Associate Professor, Department of English, Osmania University

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Abstract

Ernest Hemingway is noted for his depictions of masculinity. His works deal with strength, stoicism, and emotional restraint in men. The masculinity in Hemingway's works focuses on the tension between societal expectations and the internal struggles of his male protagonists, whose vulnerabilities complicate their relationship with traditional ideals of manhood. Hemingway's fiction both reflects and critiques the cultural understandings of masculinity of his time, offering a nuanced exploration of what it means to be a man in a world marked by violence, trauma, and shifting gender roles. Feminist readings of Hemingway's works have significantly expanded our understanding of his treatment of gender and the complexities of masculinity and femininity in his fiction. The code hero, with his stoic endurance and moral integrity, serves as a central figure in Hemingway's fiction, but the vulnerability and emotional depth of these characters expose the limitations of this ideal. Hemingway's male protagonists are defined by their adherence to societal expectations and internal conflicts and struggles. This paper will examine the theme of masculinity in Hemingway's fiction by analyzing the characteristics of his male protagonists, their relationships, and the cultural context in which they exist. The paper will explore how Hemingway's works portray the complex interaction between strength, vulnerability, emotional restraint, and self-doubt. It will argue that while Hemingway's male protagonists may appear to conform to the conventional masculine archetype, their internal battles reflect masculinity's more profound uncertainties in the post-World War I and early 20th-century world. By analyzing Hemingway's protagonists, we can better understand the author's perspective on masculinity and the broader societal forces that shaped his characters' identities and actions.

Keywords: Characteristics Study , Gender, Identity, Social Expectations, Masculinity

Introduction

In the annals of modern American literature, Ernest Hemingway stands as a towering figure, particularly noted for his depictions of masculinity. Hemingway's works are often associated with the cultural ideals of the early 20th century, which emphasized strength, stoicism, and emotional restraint in men. However, upon closer inspection, these ideals are not as unambiguously upheld as they may seem. Through protagonists such as Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*, Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, and Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway presents a nuanced portrayal of masculinity, one that highlights both the strength and fragility of the male spirit. The overarching narrative of masculinity in Hemingway's works often focuses on the tension between societal expectations and the internal struggles of his male protagonists, whose vulnerabilities complicate their relationship with traditional ideals of manhood.

This paper will examine the theme of masculinity in Hemingway's fiction by analyzing the characteristics of his male protagonists, their relationships, and the cultural context in which they exist. Specifically, the paper will explore how Hemingway's works portray the complex interaction between strength, vulnerability, emotional restraint, and self-doubt. It will argue that while Hemingway's male protagonists may appear to conform to the conventional masculine archetype, their internal battles reflect masculinity's more profound uncertainties in the post-World War I and early 20th-century world. By analyzing Hemingway's protagonists, we can better understand the author's perspective on masculinity and the broader societal forces that shaped his characters' identities and actions.

Historical and Social Context

To understand Hemingway's portrayal of masculinity, it is essential to situate his works within the historical and social context of the early 20th century. The aftermath of World War I dramatically altered societal perceptions of masculinity. Before the war, masculinity was often defined by notions of physical strength, military prowess, and unyielding emotional control. However, the horrors of the war exposed the fragility of these ideals, as millions of soldiers returned home traumatized, injured, or emotionally scarred. As the war and its aftermath reshaped

perceptions of gender, Hemingway's protagonists, frequently war veterans, must navigate the tension between the old ideal of the "stoic hero" and the new understanding of masculinity that acknowledged vulnerability and emotional complexity. In addition to the war's impact on masculinity, the rise of the "Lost Generation" had a significant influence on the male identity portrayed in Hemingway's fiction. The term "Lost Generation," popularized by Gertrude Stein, referred to a group of American writers who were disillusioned by the war's aftermath and sought to find meaning in a world that seemed irrevocably changed. As one of the most prominent members of this group, Hemingway was deeply affected by his generation's disillusionment. The traditional roles of men as soldiers, providers, and protectors were challenged by the brutality of the war and the questioning of pre-existing societal structures.

Hemingway's Influence on His Work

Hemingway's life and experiences also played a crucial role in shaping his depiction of masculinity. His service as an ambulance driver during World War I, extensive travels, love of bullfighting, and involvement in big-game hunting all shaped his conception of manhood. Hemingway was known for embodying a version of masculinity that prioritized physical toughness, independence, and a somewhat aggressive, "no-nonsense" approach to life. His adventurous lifestyle and ability to endure difficult situations made him a symbol of masculine vigor in the public eye. However, Hemingway's personal life also revealed the complexity of his relationship with masculinity. His multiple marriages struggles with mental health, and eventual suicide suggested that even he was not immune to the pressures and limitations of the masculine ideal he often portrayed in his writing. Thus, Hemingway's fiction both reflects and critiques the cultural understandings of masculinity of his time, offering a nuanced exploration of what it means to be a man in a world marked by violence, trauma, and shifting gender roles.

The Code Hero

A key concept in Hemingway's works is the "code hero," a man who lives by a strict personal code of conduct that revolves around strength, honor, and emotional restraint. For Hemingway, a code hero is someone who does not allow external circumstances to dictate his behavior, instead adhering to an inner code of honor, even in the face of death or disaster. This heroic ideal is evident in various of Hemingway's protagonists, particularly in *The Sun Also Rises* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Jake Barnes exemplifies the code hero in *The Sun Also Rises* despite his

impotence and emotional wounds. His injury during World War I symbolizes the fragility of masculinity, yet he continues to live his life by adhering to his code of conduct. He exhibits remarkable emotional restraint, rarely allowing his inner turmoil to surface. Instead of succumbing to the emotional devastation caused by his physical injury or his unrequited love for Brett Ashley, Jake channels his frustrations into a stoic, almost passive form of masculinity. His physical suffering remains hidden behind a veneer of controlled composure, reinforcing that the true hero endures silently, without complaint. Similarly, Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* represents the stoic ideal. As an American volunteer in the Spanish Civil War, Robert faces both the external violence of war and the internal violence of fear and self-doubt. Hemingway uses Robert's inner monologue to explore the tension between his heroic ideals and the personal vulnerabilities that threaten to undermine them. Robert's sacrifice at the novel's end underscores the central paradox of Hemingway's code heroes: although they strive for honor and moral clarity, they are often confronted with the messy, unpredictable realities of human existence, which complicate their ability to uphold the masculine ideal.

The Role of Physicality in the Code Hero

Hemingway's emphasis on physicality is another crucial aspect of the code hero. Many of his male protagonists are defined by their physical prowess, whether it is Jake's experience as a bullfighter in *The Sun Also Rises* or Robert's physical endurance on the battlefield in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. These characters are often measured by their emotional fortitude and ability to endure physical pain and hardship. In Hemingway's world, the body reflects masculine strength and is a battleground for internal struggles. However, Hemingway also challenges the traditional understanding of physical strength. The vulnerability of the male body is evident in his portrayal of war injuries, illness, and aging. Jake Barnes's impotence, Robert Jordan's injuries, and Frederic Henry's physical trauma in *A Farewell to Arms* all highlight how masculinity is ultimately a fragile construct, dependent on both physical endurance and emotional resilience. While Hemingway's male characters are often portrayed as embodying strength and stoicism, their vulnerability complicates these ideals. Masculinity in Hemingway's work is not solely about the exterior toughness or the emotional distance many of his characters project. Instead, vulnerability, whether physical, emotional, or psychological, frequently underscores the fragility of these men and reveals the limitations of the traditional masculine ideal.

In *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederic Henry's journey through war reflects a man's

struggle to reconcile his desires for personal connection and heroic sacrifice. Initially, Frederic embraces the war and its associated masculine virtues: courage, honor, and duty. However, his growing disillusionment with the war, particularly after the brutal death of his comrades, reveals the emotional toll that such ideals take on the individual. Frederic's relationship with Catherine Barkley offers a space for emotional vulnerability, but this vulnerability also contrasts sharply with the cold, impersonal violence of the battlefield. Similarly, in *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake Barnes's impotence is a metaphor for masculinity's fragility. His war injury prevents him from engaging in conventional expressions of masculinity, such as sexual conquest or physical dominance. However, he constantly strives to prove his worth through emotional restraint and stoic endurance. Jake's emotional and physical scars become a symbol of the postwar crisis of masculinity and how men, especially those who have been wounded or traumatized, must find new ways of defining themselves in a world that no longer honors traditional masculine virtues. Hemingway's depiction of vulnerability challenges the idea that masculinity is purely defined by physical strength and emotional restraint. Rather, vulnerability is an intrinsic part of the male experience in Hemingway's works, reminding us that even the most "heroic" men are not immune to the internal battles that shape their identities.

Hemingway's Depiction of Male Relationships

Hemingway's male characters often find themselves in relationships with other men that both reinforce and challenge traditional notions of masculinity. These relationships provide insight into the ways in which masculinity is socially constructed and how it is tested through competition, camaraderie, and emotional connection. In *The Sun Also Rises*, the relationship between Jake Barnes and Robert Cohn demonstrates how social expectations and individual insecurities shape masculine identity. Robert Cohn, an outsider among the American expatriates in Paris, struggles to live up to the traditional masculine ideals central to the group. Cohn's emotional sensitivity and romantic desires make him an object of scorn for the other men, particularly Jake. Jake's rivalry with Cohn serves as a reflection of the way in which masculinity is often defined by competition and aggression, even among friends. Cohn's failure to live up to the traditional masculine ideal leads to his alienation, illustrating the dangers of rigidly adhering to these norms.

In contrast, Jake's relationship with Bill Gorton offers a more supportive view of masculinity. Bill, a fellow expatriate, serves as Jake's confidant and friend. Their interactions are marked by humor, mutual respect, and emotional openness. This

relationship allows for a more emotionally nuanced form of masculinity that is not rooted in competition or dominance but in friendship and shared experience.

Masculinity and War

War plays a crucial role in shaping Hemingway's vision of masculinity. For many of his protagonists, war serves as both a testing ground and a defining moment. Characters like Frederic Henry, Robert Jordan, and others in Hemingway's novels often find that their experiences deeply impact their understanding of masculinity on the battlefield. The physical and emotional toll of war forces these characters to confront the limitations of the masculine ideal and to question their sense of identity. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Robert Jordan's participation in the Spanish Civil War serves as a test of his courage and an opportunity to live by the ideals of honor and duty. However, the brutal realities of war undermine the traditional heroic image of the soldier, exposing the emotional and psychological toll it takes on those who participate in it. Hemingway's portrayal of war reveals how masculine identity is shaped by external forces, particularly those related to violence, power, and duty. Likewise, Frederic Henry's experiences in *A Farewell to Arms* highlight the emotional devastation that war inflicts on men. While Frederic initially embraces the romantic ideals of warfare, his eventual disillusionment with both the war and the concept of heroism challenges the idea that masculinity is solely defined by courage and sacrifice. Instead, Hemingway presents a vision of masculinity that acknowledges the pain, loss, and emotional exhaustion that come with war, forcing men to reconcile their ideals with the realities of the world around them.

Feminist readings of Ernest Hemingway's works have long been a subject of academic debate. Hemingway, known for his portrayal of masculinity, the "code hero," and his exploration of male characters who face personal and external challenges, often finds his female characters and the gender dynamics within his stories under scrutiny. Feminist critiques of Hemingway are varied, but they often focus on issues such as gender roles, representation of women, and the power dynamics between men and women in his fiction. Some scholars view Hemingway's treatment of women as deeply problematic. In contrast, others suggest that he offers a more nuanced and complex representation of gender, particularly within the context of his time.

Hemingway's Representation of Women: Traditional or Subversive?

Hemingway's female characters are often seen as secondary to the male protagonists, with their primary function being to serve as love interests, emotional

support, or symbols of male desire, suffering, or conquest. In works such as *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*, women are depicted in ways that reflect traditional gender roles. For example, in *The Sun Also Rises*, Brett Ashley, the novel's main female character, is often viewed through the lens of male desire, particularly that of Jake Barnes, the protagonist. Brett's sexual independence and emotional volatility (especially in her relationships with men) are portrayed in ways that challenge traditional femininity but also align her with a kind of tragic flaw or weakness. Similarly, in *A Farewell to Arms*, Catherine Barkley's role as a nurse and lover to Frederic Henry positions her within a traditional narrative of womanhood, nurturing, self-sacrificial, and mainly defined by her male counterpart. Some feminist critics have interpreted her ultimate sacrifice of dying in childbirth as an embodiment of women's disposability in Hemingway's world, where women are often presented as passive, victimized, or secondary to the central male character's journey. However, not all feminist perspectives view Hemingway's treatment of women in a negative light. Some scholars argue that Hemingway's female characters are not mere stereotypes or secondary figures but are complex women who navigate their struggles for autonomy and identity. For example, in *The Garden of Eden*, Catherine emerges as a more fully developed woman who attempts to challenge traditional gender roles and explore sexual freedom and personal identity, even if these efforts are ultimately tragic.

Gender Dynamics and Power Relations

Feminist critiques of Hemingway often point to the imbalanced gender dynamics in his works, where male characters dominate both in terms of narrative and emotional complexity. In contrast, female characters tend to be defined through their relationships with men. In many of his novels, such as *The Sun Also Rises*, men engage in intense friendships, rivalries, and journeys of self-discovery. At the same time, the female characters are often defined by their relationships with the men and are depicted as either objects of desire or emotional support. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the character of Maria is a symbol of purity and sexual innocence, and her relationship with Robert Jordan can be read as an example of the male character's attempt to preserve his masculinity by controlling and "saving" the female character. The power dynamics in these relationships often reflect a traditional, patriarchal structure in which the man is in control. At the same time, the woman is positioned as someone to be "rescued" or controlled. Maria's experience of sexual trauma (having been raped by Fascist soldiers) highlights her vulnerability and the power

imbalance in her relationship with Robert, reinforcing a feminist critique of Hemingway's representation of women as victims or passive recipients of male desires. Hemingway's treatment of the power dynamics between the sexes is often seen as reflective of the broader social context in which he wrote early to mid-20th century America, where gender inequality and patriarchal structures were dominant. However, feminist critiques also point out that Hemingway's works can reflect a more profound ambivalence about men's and women's roles and expectations. While many of his female characters exist in a state of subjugation or are objectified in some way, they also exhibit resilience, independence, and complexity in the face of male-dominated social systems.

Hemingway and the Idealization of Masculinity

Hemingway's portrayal of masculinity has been a central topic of feminist analysis. The idealized "code hero" of Hemingway's fiction, characterized by stoicism, emotional restraint, and physical prowess, often acts as a foil to the female characters, who are frequently depicted as emotionally volatile, sexually available, or vulnerable. These gendered representations highlight how Hemingway's work reinforces traditional gender expectations, particularly the expectation that men should be emotionally self-sufficient and physically dominant. At the same time, women are expected to be nurturing, self-sacrificing, and supportive of male desires. The emphasis on the hero's inner struggles, his need for emotional restraint, his isolation, and his eventual understanding of his limitations has been interpreted as both a critique of rigid masculinity and as a reinforcement of patriarchal norms. Feminist critics have suggested that Hemingway's male protagonists may respond to a culture that demands a specific kind of masculinity, which ultimately restricts their emotional freedom and ability to form meaningful, reciprocal relationships with women. In this light, Hemingway's men are not simply embodiments of traditional masculinity but are often tragically confined by its limitations.

Additionally, Hemingway's obsession with "grace under pressure," which defines the ideal masculine hero, is often analyzed as a reflection of a gendered ideal that suppresses vulnerability and emotional expression. This emphasis on emotional restraint not only marginalizes women but also condemns men to live out an emotionally repressive existence. Feminists reading Hemingway from this perspective highlight the emotional violence inflicted on both women and men by a rigid system of gender expectations.

Feminist Literary Criticism and Hemingway's Legacy

Feminist critics have played a significant role in reshaping our understanding of Hemingway's literary legacy. While the traditional reading of Hemingway as a master of the modernist short story and a pioneer of masculine literature continues to dominate, feminist readings complicate this view by focusing on the gendered nature of his writing. Critics like Judith Fetterley, in her famous essay "The Resisting Reader," argue that Hemingway's works often position the reader (particularly female readers) in an adversarial relationship with the text due to the sexist portrayal of women and how male dominance is presented as natural or heroic. Feminist readings of Hemingway also examine how his personal life intersects with his writing. Hemingway's complex relationships with women, marked by numerous marriages, infidelities, and tumultuous divorces, provide context for his representation of gender dynamics in his works. Critics have explored how Hemingway's struggles with masculinity and femininity and his public persona as a hyper-masculine adventurer may have shaped his literary portrayals of women and men. This biographical context allows for a deeper exploration of how Hemingway's personal experiences influenced his literary works and the gendered relationships he depicted.

Additionally, feminist scholars have turned their attention to how Hemingway's works can be reinterpreted through a feminist lens. Rather than merely critiquing the author for his apparent sexism, some scholars focus on how the female characters in Hemingway's works can be seen as attempts to push against traditional gender roles, even if these attempts are often ultimately unsuccessful or tragic. For example, Brett Ashley's sexual freedom in *The Sun Also Rises* can be seen as both a subversion of traditional femininity and a tragic failure to escape the societal limitations placed on women.

Reinterpreting Female Characters in Hemingway's Fiction

Recent feminist scholarship has also emphasized the potential for reinterpreting Hemingway's female characters beyond the conventional stereotypes of the passive woman or the tragic victim. Characters such as Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* and Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises* have been analyzed as figures of strength and autonomy despite their often restrictive roles in the narrative. Feminist scholars argue that these characters, while confined by the patriarchal structures within the text, are also subtly resisting their roles and expressing forms of agency within the limited spaces available to them. For example, Brett's relationships with men, particularly her emotional and sexual relationships, can be interpreted as a form of rebellion against the expectations placed on women in the post-World War I

era. Brett is depicted as a sexually autonomous woman who actively pursues her desires. However, her tragic inability to find fulfillment or peace within the constraints of her gendered role highlights the limitations of this rebellion in Hemingway's world. Catherine Barkley, too, while often seen as the archetype of the self-sacrificing woman, is not entirely passive. In *A Farewell to Arms*, she takes control of her relationship with Frederic Henry and asserts her agency in their love affair. However, feminist critics note that her role is still shaped by traditional gender roles, which ultimately dictate the tragic trajectory of her character's fate.

Feminist readings of Hemingway's works have significantly expanded our understanding of his treatment of gender and the complexities of masculinity and femininity in his fiction. While Hemingway is often criticized for reinforcing patriarchal gender norms, feminist critics have also highlighted how his works can be read as critiques of these norms, particularly the limitations imposed on both men and women by rigid gender expectations. The struggles of Hemingway's male characters to navigate their emotional and social worlds and the complex and often tragic roles of his female characters reflect broader societal tensions surrounding gender in the early 20th century. Through these feminist critiques, we are offered a more nuanced understanding of Hemingway's legacy, which acknowledges both the strengths and limitations of his representations of gender.

Conclusion

Ernest Hemingway's portrayal of masculinity is complex and multifaceted, revealing his male characters' strength and vulnerability. Through his examination of war, physicality, emotional restraint, and relationships, Hemingway critiques and explores the cultural ideals of masculinity in the early 20th century. With his stoic endurance and moral integrity, the code hero is a central figure in Hemingway's fiction. However, the vulnerability and emotional depth of these characters expose the limitations of this ideal. Ultimately, Hemingway's male protagonists are defined by their adherence to societal expectations and internal conflicts and struggles. Through their interactions with the world around them, whether it be the chaos of war, the intimacy of relationships, or the physical challenges they face, they are forced to confront the fragility of masculinity and the personal toll that comes with it. Hemingway's works remain a powerful commentary on the complexities of gender, identity, and the human condition, offering readers a nuanced and enduring exploration of what it means to be a man.

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