

MAN - WOMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SELECT FICTION OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

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Abstract:

Every reader of Ernest Hemingway knows that man-woman relationship is a central subject of Hemingway's work, and many readers have been struck by what seemed to be different and changing treatments of that subject in his work. The purpose of this study is to consider the subject of this relationship as treated by Hemingway in his major and representative works, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926),. Several feminist critics who have revisioned Hemingway's fiction found it wanting in its portrayal of women characters. But, though these attacks have become a critical commonplace and are now most often associated with feminist criticism. They criticized Hemingway's deficiencies in the characterization of women as well as their inabilities in depicting mature sexuality. Hemingway is criticized not only for the malevolence of his characterizations but also for his shallow and superficial portrayals of female characters. A major complaint is that he uses his female characters as devices, a convenience, and a technique to turn a monologue into a dialogue. The shallow or superficial portrayal is usually blamed on Hemingway's narrow concept of masculinity, the subject of much critical derision. Catherine has no self and very little depth as a fictional character. Whether Hemingway could or could not create a lifelike woman character seems beside the point here and elsewhere in his fiction. Catherine is a hard-to-believe dream girl who can be read on the realistic level only as a neurotic but who is better read as a deliberate stylization. One important way to understand Hemingway's depiction of women is as a reassertion of patriarchal power in American literature and culture. Reading their work provides an opportunity to reflect upon the gendered nature of the literary canon and of the American cultural history that canon is supposed to represent. Although he was far from alone in the attempt to re-establish male domination in the cultural sphere, he stands out as a major figure in that effort, a culture hero (or villain) whose life and work had a marked effect on the history of gender in the twentieth century.

Keywords: man-woman relationship, characterizations, depiction, culture hero, etc

Every reader of Ernest Hemingway knows that man-woman relationship is a central subject of Hemingway's work, and many readers have been struck by what seemed to be different and changing treatments of that subject in his work. The purpose of this study is to consider the subject of this relationship as treated by Hemingway in his major and representative works, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Hemingway's concept had matured from a negativistic disillusionment with romantic love to an acceptance of affirmative love. In Hemingway, erotic love is at all times a source of pleasure that is commendable but morally neutral. Evaluating and applying the literature that deals with the man-woman relationship, in general, is a more difficult task than evaluating the relevant criticism of Hemingway alone. Major themes and images emerge more clearly the more one reads Hemingway, and he is that kind of writer whose total production is greater than the sum of the parts. Because the topic is so broad, that only major views and works on this strongest of all human emotions are considered.

There are many indications in his writing that man-woman relationship was a conscious preoccupation for Hemingway: in titles like *Men without Women*, for instance. It is also the case, however, that current interest in these questions has established a frame of reference related to this topic which is integral to Hemingway's fiction and has become more visible and more interesting.

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The validity of some feminist critiques of American male novelists has been questioned. The charge has been made that the writers they choose for their illustrations of male deficiencies are not representative. To avoid such a charge, this study will focus on Hemingway's man-woman relationship in his fictional works. Long before the rebirth of the women's movement in the sixties, individual critics had found fault with Hemingway, for the inadequate realization of his female characters.

Perhaps the first critic to be sensitive to Hemingway's distorted depiction of women was Edmund Wilson. As early as 1939 Wilson perceived what he called Hemingway's growing antagonism to women, particularly evident in *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*. Wilson observed that the negative portrayal of a woman came through works principally, but that the tendency could be traced through many of the other short stories. In Wilson's reading, Hemingway's early women are all frustrated or thwarted or die because of their relationships with men. Only the docile, submissive, types provide satisfactory partners, and at that, they often suffer the same fate as their more aggressive female characters. His

heroines are meant to show a symbolic or ritualistic function in the service of man. Therefore, women assume to enact the two extremes of destructive deadliness or devoted docility.

Except in a few short stories, Hemingway does not choose to depict every day, the mundane, the multiple possibilities of different individuals acting, reacting, and interacting. The protagonists of his novels operate in supercharged, romantic environments: the confrontation with death, war, safari, fishing trips, and male-dominated worlds. Women, when they enter these worlds, are usually alone. In fact, there is a scarcity of female characters in all of Hemingway's novels.

Hemingway is criticized not only for the malevolence of his characterizations but also for his shallow and superficial portrayals of female characters. A major complaint is that he uses his female characters as devices, a convenience, and a technique to turn a monologue into a dialogue. The shallow or superficial portrayal is usually blamed on Hemingway's narrow concept of masculinity, the subject of much critical derision.

Hemingway's failure in the area of female characterization is a result of fear which signified a rejection of sexual maturity. Hemingway attributes the destruction of Eden and the failure of romantic love to women, thereby exonerating himself from responsibility for the failure of his romantic relationships; this he does partially because of his fear of his own susceptibility to romantic love and partially out of his equally strong fear of being dominated by women.

Information about Hemingway's interactions with three of the most significant women in his early life, women who helped to form his attitudes towards the opposite sex, provides a basis for understanding the nature of the man-woman relationship in his early works. Subsequent relationships did not have the same impact either on his character or on his art. The women who most influenced him were his mother, Grace Hall Hemingway; the woman he first proposed to, Agnes von Kurowsky; and his first wife, Hadley Richardson, the mother of his first son. All three were older than he was; all three treated him in a maternal manner; all three exemplified aspects of the positive and negative features of the Great Mother. But more than that, all three were enduring types who functioned very well without him, maintained their selfhood, indomitable survivors. Though much of Hemingway's work professes an attitude of near-nihilistic despair, there are certain abilities that excite his admiration. "The good fight of the lost cause" and the capacity to endure punishment, a "stoic or masochistic determination to take it," are two of the positive qualities he admires. These women, and by extension the characters modeled after them, display these indomitable characteristics.

In order to understand Hemingway's man-woman relationship it is necessary to discuss the three women who played a very important role in shaping his attitude toward sex and sexuality. Hemingway's indestructible women characters, then, are projections of his responses to the three main women in his life during the years when his understanding of the

female sex was being formed. Like his mother and Agnes and Hadley, they have an inner strength, an ability to cope with whatever life dishes out for them. As these three women "mothered" Ernest, so his indestructible women characters often "mother" their men. On the most elementary level, they represent the various characteristics, positive and negative, of the Great Mother, an aspect of the archetypal feminine. Hemingway himself appears to have been conscious of these Jungian notions acknowledging on one occasion that he "believed imagination could be the result of inherited racial experience".

Chapter II deals with, *The Sun Also Rises* which focuses on failed sexual relationships as metaphors for the postwar human condition. The novel uses man's sexual inadequacies as a sign of his moral and spiritual failings. The novel projects an interesting facet to the man-woman relationship in the context of the lost generation.

If the reader does not approve of Brett Ashley's rather random sexual activity, it is just possible that neither Jake nor Hemingway wanted approval for her promiscuity. Like Jake and Mike Campbell, Brett Ashley is another war cripple, for whom the stable prewar values have disappeared. When Cohn asks Jake about her, Jake tells him she is a thirty-four-year-old drunk whose "true love" died during the war and who has twice married and divorced. This is the same lady who will not go to Biarritz with Count Mippipopulous for ten thousand dollars, but who will go to San Sebastian with Robert Cohn for a week because it amuses her. Neither decision is complicated by the moral values that sustained the generation of Hemingway's parents. The twenties were modern times, the first sexual revolution of the twentieth century.

It is in this context that we should read of Brett's promiscuity and Frances Clyne's affair with Robert Cohn. These are the "new women" of the period, the women who had been sexually liberated but who still depended on men for their identity and money. They are representative of the women who came of age with the movie sex symbol. They are the women of the lost generation for whom it was mandatory to discuss sexuality openly. If Frances Clyne makes the reader as uncomfortable as she makes Jake Barnes, if Brett Ashley leaves us a bit irritated with her random sexual encounters, perhaps, that is how Hemingway wanted to portray the dubious man-woman relationships. Perhaps he did not approve of these women himself.

Though Jake perceives the folly of their relationship more sharply than Brett does, he nonetheless submits to the tyranny of romantic love. Brett uses the phrase "true love," and use, of course, applies it to Jake during one of their frequent scenes of misery. They avow their love for one another, and they think what a "bad time" they have because of their consummate inconsumable love. With her love vow on her lips and unknown to Jake, Brett is planning her trip to San Sebastian where she will have a brief fling with Robert Cohn, Jake's friend. Jake wants to try living together with Brett, but, says Brett, it is better for Jake and better for her but they live apart.

Jake accompanies his irony with a large amount of pity, in this case, self-pity. Both Jake and Brett have to let others know how they suffer; so Jake tells still about his love for Brett, and Brett tells Mike about her affairs and tells Jake about her new-found passion for Pedro Romero. At the same time, she has to know if Jake still loves her, for he is still the only person she has. She apparently justifies her promiscuity and torture of Jake, her true love, on the grounds of her unique role; she is the fair lady and, tortured by love herself, her role is to torture, to be, as Cohn calls her, a Circe.

Only after Jake acts as her pimp with Romero does he finally begin to emerge from his passive role, and it is Cohn who has to label Jake for what he is. Of course, in resorting to violence, Cohn also plays the fool, but after his Quixotic fights with Jake, Mike, and Romero, Jake's attitudes seem to clear. The progress of the book is towards a frenzied, idiotic climax of action and "romance" at the end of the fiesta. Afterward, there is calmness, cleanliness, catharsis – at least for Jake. His love for Brett has undergone a subtle change. From unreasoning passion, it has gone through a period of bitter awareness to an ending which describes a relationship of responsibility and care. Passion is submerged if not subdued.

Knowing her own self-centeredness and perhaps perceiving this somewhat paradoxical performance as Jake does, Brett can also make a paradoxical sacrifice. In the quiet but climactic Book III, she knows that her selfishness and her lechery would eventually hurt Romero, as Montoya predicted, and so she selflessly drives him away. Jake also seems to have come to a greater knowledge of his condition than at any other time. It is true that the concluding note of the novel is still one of irony and pity, but he does not give way to maudlin tears or resort to bitter invective over Brett's cruelty in using him as a pimp and then a rescuer when she is down and out in Madrid. We are not much, they say by their actions, but we are all that we have. Like the polite bartender of the last chapter, they must exercise some devotion to each other by simple acts of kindness. Such is the skeptical but not nihilistic conclusion of Hemingway's first novel.

He does not even have the illusion of the lost chance with her to sustain him anymore. His final remark in the novel clearly indicates that When Brett says to him, "Oh, Jake, we could have had such a damned good time together", his eyes are qualified with "Isn't it pretty to think so?" The word "pretty" for a man like Jake says it all. Pretty is a woman's word. The notion that all would have been good, if only ..., is an attractive one, a pretty notion, but it is not sound, not substantial.

Chapter III deals with pessimism, disillusionment, desertion, biological trap and death and *Farewell to Arms* illustrates what a heavy price the couple have to pay for being irresponsible in a man-woman relationship against the background of the war. Within a tough context of modern war not fought according to chivalric rules, the man-woman relationship in *A Farewell to Arms* is wildly romantic. An improbable hero and heroine live an adolescent

dreamlife full of adventure and sex. When the courtship is over, she conveniently dies. Lieutenant Frederic Henry falls into a love trap. Initially, he says he wants only physical love, and Catherine is preferable to the whores in the army-sponsored bordello whom Henry visited regularly and who might give him another case of gonorrhea. Catherine is, after all, beautiful to him and always available, working at the field hospital where he is attached and being "a little crazy" because of the death of her soldier fiancé.

But Frederic who had never been in love and who knew he "did not love Catherine Barkley nor had any idea of loving her" swiftly changes his mind. Suddenly the ribaldry of the officer's mess. The romanceless love of the whorehouse is distasteful to him, and he regrets having treated Catherine so lightly. After his wounding – the beginning of the end of his romance with war – Catherine comes to his hospital bed, and "When I saw her I was in love with her".

Catherine has no self and very little depth as a fictional character. Whether Hemingway could or could not create a lifelike woman character seems beside the point here and elsewhere in his fiction. He had no need for one in a context that demanded a heroine who lacked a self. Selfhood or individuality is necessary for one to love and be loved in a relationship. Catherine is afraid of herself in a manner that suggests Nick Adam's fear of falling asleep after his traumatic wounding; the background of her fear was the violent death of her first fiancé and her subsequent "craziness". She wants to lose her identity in her love. She doesn't care what they do or where they go; whatever Henry wants is fine with her; she will be what he wants, and they will never fight because if anything ever came between them they would "be gone"; she doesn't "live at all" when they are apart even briefly, and once after seeing a fox she imagines how lovely it would be for them to be in such a nonhuman condition where thought and individually would be even more remote than in their Swiss hideout.

Catherine takes full responsibility for their pregnancy and for figuring out where and how she will have their baby and then, when she dies, she takes, in conjunction with certain ill-defined cosmic forces, the responsibility for this, too. It is possible for Frederic to love Catherine because she provides him with the only kind of relationship that he is capable of accepting, one in which he does not have to act, in which he does not have to think about things because she does it for him and one in which he does not have to assume responsibility and to which he does not have to make a final commitment because both her facile logic to the effect that they are already married and her ultimate death give him a convenient out.

Catherine merely fulfills Frederic's need to avoid responsibility and to remain uncommitted in the relationship is certainly at some level to say she has failed him, their love has no sense of purpose, meaning, and direction. Catherine's failure and her eventual death carries the hope with it of the destruction of her destructive love that excludes the world, that in its very denial of self possesses selfishly, that leads nowhere beyond the bed through foolish

suffering. Catherine's very adaptability to Frederic's need to reduce life to its lowest denominator, to make it simple, to make it thoughtless, to destroy consciousness and responsibility in a romantic. But one can give the emotional screw of the novel one final turn. If Catherine finally fails Frederic, it may be that in so doing she is fulfilling his ultimate need, which is to feel betrayed.

Catherine relates to Frederic Henry's vision of betrayal because she too betrays him. She gets him involved with her by offering him a relationship in which there will be no drawbacks, no demands, pressures or responsibilities, and then she presents him with the ultimate responsibility of her pregnancy. Further, after making him emotionally dependent on her, she abandons him; she dies and leaves him alone to face a cold war-torn hostile world.

Catherine knows, however, that they have done something wrong, because their sexual pleasure, however innocent they think it, has resulted in pregnancy. She resists marriage, knowing that it would result in separation, for (according to Red Cross rules) a woman cannot be both nurse (sister) and wife. Though Catherine is not worried about her pregnancy, Frederic Henry is, and when she announces it and tells him that she will look after the details of going away and having the baby, he is the one who says, "You always feel trapped biologically" (FTA, 139). But it is she who is trapped, and she will die in labor, because how else can the story end? Frederic Henry, the child-man, cannot be expected to share his mother-lover with a real baby. Thus, in the logic of the narrative, Catherine's determination to have the baby is her death warrant. Frederic survives, but, as Hemingway noted on an unpublished manuscript page of the novel, "the position of the survivor of a great calamity is seldom admirable" (Reynolds 1976, 60). The great calamity, in this case, is not so much war or death as love itself.

Finally, at the end of the novel, we get the sense that Frederic sees himself as totally lost. He feels he is alone in an empty world which no longer has in it for him any source of sustenance. And the agency of this betrayal is Catherine, who cuts him off from life as effectively as she strangles her own son inside her. Frederic's attitude, then, is finally not much different from the doctor who reprimands Catherine on her deathbed for being so selfish as to think of dying and leaving her husband.

Catherine allows Frederic to avoid the responsibility of stable relationship and commitment. But in so far as this allows him to avoid growing up, she has failed him miserably. If Catherine is just one more piece of evidence to validate his sentimental and egocentric philosophy that the world exists for the single purpose of breaking him, then she has once again failed him. Catherine not only bad news but finally we see her death as the unconscious expression of the cumulative hostilities which Frederic feels towards her.

Catherine is a hard-to-believe dream girl who can be read on the realistic level only as a neurotic but who is better read as a deliberate stylization. Her death carries the hope with it of the destruction of her destructive love that excludes the world, that in its very denial of self possesses selfishly, that leads nowhere beyond the bed and the dream of a mystical transport of ordinary men and women to a divine state of love through foolish suffering. Indeed, the doctor and both of them say that it is foolish and silly to die. But die Catherine does, and the emptiness that Henry feels is the necessary state that must precede a refilling of his spirit with the more substantial stuff of agape. The old love dies with Catherine, and Henry's malaise even when living his idyll before her death is practically a guarantee that the Hemingway hero, having tried one love that has failed, will search for another. The promise of success in a man-woman relationship had been hinted at in the first two novels. It was to be gradually evolved in Hemingway's middle period.

Chapter IV deals with Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* where his skeptic man-woman relationship takes a positive turn with affirmative love and commitment to marriage. Although the Spanish novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* has so-called romantic elements, the hero Robert Jordan is no Jake Barnes and no Lieutenant Henry. Nor is Maria a Brett Ashley or even a Catherine Barkley. It is true that the love story of Jordan and Maria bears a strong resemblance to that of Lieutenant Henry and Catherine of *A Farewell to Arms*, but the differences at least indicate a strong shift in purpose, a conscious attempt to see love in a man-woman relationship in a different way and to reinterpret its values. The difference is crystallized in the endings: not the heroine, but the hero, Robert Jordan, dies, and he dies for a reason, a cause: but Catherine Barkley of the earlier novel dies, as Lieutenant Henry believes, for no reason at all; she has simply been caught in a biological trap. The material of the novel is the ancient epic manner of a story of love imposed upon a story of war. For Hemingway, the concept of love unifies the stories of war and love. The tragedy of war is not a much its death and destruction, for these are man's lot in any form other than war. Hemingway feels that War is horrible because it is a type of complete hatred, the total, irrational negation of love.

He dies after he has obtained the love of a woman and the respect and affection of the guerrillas, for whom he makes a final effort of will to ensure their safe escape. Without the personal love of Maria and the guerrillas, he would have died badly and futilely and bitterly. Jordan's decision to marry Maria is a monumental one that invites comparison with Lieutenant Henry's decision in *A Farewell to Arms*. The earlier hero who breaks with society's conventions and makes his separate peace by running off with his lady love is not as well motivated to desire marriage as Jordan is. Frederic Henry delays his marriage because Catherine regards it of little importance, but the rebel looks forward to it, after the embarrassing pregnancy is over, as a necessary seal of their love.

His love for Maria partakes of the romantic only if one limits that word to mean an ideal stylization. Maria is not meant to be “real”. She is an image, a mythic woman much better than any real woman just as Jordan is an oversized hero, an epic lover, and fighter. Jordan still keeps the life-giving love on the periphery of his death-dealing life. He fights for love. He loses his life and his love in the only way he can find life and love. His noble sacrifice is, however, in some ways an avoidance of love's responsibilities. But at the same time, Hemingway redefines man-woman relationship as a symbol of commitment to marriage and true love.

Chapter V conclusion deals with how man-woman relationships have undergone a gradual transition from negativism to positive affirmative ideals of true love and abiding relationships with an emphasis on genuine commitment to each other. His early stories won wide critical praise for their stoic, understated, “masculine” style and their graphic depiction of male pursuits and attitudes.

The war between the sexes had a decisive effect on his thinking and writing about women. Hemingway was a witness to, and a major participant in, the broad cultural struggles of his time, especially the rise of modernism and the gender war. Not surprisingly, he and his writings became a significant site of those struggles. By contextualizing the man and his work, we can better understand their importance in our time.

Hemingway frequently makes the theme of masculinity and negative depiction of women central in his work. But this is not to say that he creates only one type of woman: His search for complementary relations between the sexes expresses itself in a wide range of fictional females. The modern, complex woman (Lady Brett Ashley), although appealing in many ways, does not normally achieve true reciprocity with a man. Hemingway shows that between Woman and Man there are, in the language of today's divorce court, “irreconcilable differences”. The modern woman who complements the modern man is the rare exception (Catherine Barkley), Marie Morgan.

After the publication of *A Farewell to Arms*, a new and more authoritative Hemingway emerged, a he-man of exaggerated virility and masculine expertise.

His father's suicide in December 1928 bitterly reminded him of the failure of his parent's marriage, a failure Hemingway blamed on his mother's bullying and on his father's inability to stand up to her. Linda Wagner suggests that it was at this point that Hemingway stopped believing in the “mystic ideal of a genuine love” between a man and a woman. By this time, too, his own marriage to Hadley was over, and he was remarried to Pauline. Years later, when he reflected back on these events, Hemingway stated flatly that his mother “forced [his] father to suicide”. And in his autobiographical *A Moveable Feast*, published posthumously in 1964, he blamed Pauline for the destruction of his first marriage but also presented himself, unflatteringly, as a passive victim of circumstances. It may be that he found his father's

passivity within himself, and he reacted by constructing a more active, courageous, masculine persona. Although Hemingway's fictional treatment of gender necessarily proceeded from his personal psychology, that very personality was shaped by and was reacting to, biographical and historical circumstances that included the increasing influence of women within the literary world and over American culture generally.

One important way to understand Hemingway's depiction of women is as a reassertion of patriarchal power in American literature and culture. Reading their work provides an opportunity to reflect upon the gendered nature of the literary canon and of the American cultural history that canon is supposed to represent. Although he was far from alone in the attempt to re-establish male domination in the cultural sphere, he stands out as a major figure in that effort, a culture hero (or villain) whose life and work had a marked effect on the history of gender in the twentieth century.

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