
The Portrayal of Women in Hemingway's Literature: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) portrayed numerous male characters in his literary works who consistently exhibited strength, whether it be physical or spiritual, as exemplified by Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). Conversely, the female characters in his novels have often been overlooked. However, upon closer examination of Hemingway's body of work, it becomes evident that there are several indispensable women who play significant roles in his narratives, thereby contrasting the portrayal of men. This paper primarily focuses on three distinct categories of women depicted in Hemingway's literary works, examining his attitudes towards them, and providing an analysis of the underlying reasons behind these attitudes.

Keywords: Lost generation, Feminism, Women, Hemingway.

Introduction

The American populace, akin to individuals globally, encountered a predicament concerning their values, specifically pertaining to the impulsive youth who were born under unique circumstances of the great wars. They were commonly referred to as the war generation, also known as the 'lost generation' according to Gertrude Stein's characterization. The individuals experienced a sense of disillusionment and sadness. The individuals experienced a disruption in their emotional state, resulting in a sense of sorrow, a pessimistic perspective, and a reluctance to comply with any form of authority. Conversely, they subjected themselves to the dominion of their self-fashioned entity. The inherent lack of naturalness in the context of warfare resulted in a corresponding lack of naturalness within the realm of romantic relationships. As a result, the portrayal of love in contemporary American literature has often been characterised by its brevity and inevitable demise. It is imperative not to overlook the contemporary phenomenon of women who engage in multiple romantic relationships. The concept of asserting one's manhood is thus of utmost significance. As a proponent of realism, the author has portrayed women in American society as he

observed them, encompassing both types. In the examination of female characters in Hemingway's works, the author categorises them into three distinct groups based on social gender norms and the individual traits of the women: the traditional woman, the new woman, and the ideal woman. Identifying these various female characters within the author's novels does not pose a significant challenge. The female characters depicted in the literary works of Ernest Hemingway serve as reflections of the writer's engagement with societal dynamics. The majority of these individuals are depicted as either contravening established norms and customs pertaining to marriage, sexuality, and familial relationships, or actively resisting such norms. The portrayal of female characters in the author's novels can be interpreted as exhibiting misogynistic tendencies, particularly when they are depicted as individuals who are unable to exist independently from the influence of men and are reduced to mere objects of sexual desire. Individuals in this particular demographic encounter challenges in maintaining a conventional lifestyle as they consistently rely on males for sustenance, clothing, and housing. The primary factors contributing to their predicament are shyness, an inferiority complex, illiteracy, and a lack of cognitive clarity. Even women who possess higher levels of education and exhibit independent thinking and behaviour encounter difficulties in their efforts to combat societal norms, as well as the exploitation they may experience from their husbands and other family members. In the novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), the character

Catherine Barkley is portrayed as possessing remarkable charm, displaying a notable simplicity, exhibiting great gentleness, expressing profound sincerity, demonstrating intense emotional depth, and exemplifying admirable bravery. In the final stages, she achieves a nearly heroic status. Despite her inquiries about Henry's previous romantic relationships, she exhibits a complete absence of negative emotions such as ill-will, malice, spite, and even jealousy. She lacks aggression and self-assertiveness. The individual's understanding of love entails a total relinquishment of her own identity to the man who has engendered her affection. The individual in question assimilates her identity with that of her romantic partner, surrendering herself entirely to his control, granting him unrestricted agency over her person, and exhibiting a perceived absence of personal volition subsequent to becoming entranced by him. It can be argued that she lacks personal distinctiveness and lives a nebulous existence. The novel titled *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), revolves around the character of Brett Ashley, hereafter referred to as Brett, and her romantic relationship with Jake Barnes, hereafter referred to as Jake. The relationship is experiencing difficulties as a result of Jake's physical injury, which has rendered him impotent. The nature of their relationship serves as an illustration of love that is confined primarily to sexual aspects and the degree of importance placed on it within the relationship. Put differently, the lack of sexual activity results in the inability to achieve enduring love, a phenomenon that frequently proves to be of

brief duration. Brett is portrayed as a highly sexually proficient individual, adept at navigating her interpersonal connections with men.

Portrayal of Women

The women portrayed in Ernest Hemingway's short stories, including *Cat in the Rain* (1925), *Indian Camp* (1924), *Mr. and Mrs. Elliot* (1925), and *The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife* (1925), embody characteristics of purity, piety, domesticity, and submissiveness. These qualities, referred to as the "cardinal virtues" (Welter, 151) of genuine femininity by Barbara Welter, are consistently attributed to these female characters. These women exhibited a lack of independence and consistently depended on men for support. They positioned themselves not alongside males but rather in a position of subservience, displaying apathy and lack of empathy towards them, exhibiting a passive response to their requirements. Hemingway's portrayal of women in these stories lacks extensive characterization, with a greater emphasis placed on the male characters. The female individuals in question were devoid of any given names. Naturally, the aforementioned portrayal by Hemingway serves as a representation of the subordinate status of these individuals. The short story *Cat in the Rain* provides readers with a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of this particular type of woman. The female American individual and her spouse, George, were situated within a lodging establishment. The husband consistently engaged in the act of reading literary materials. The woman engaged in a

conversation with her beloved spouse regarding her thoughts and personal requirements. The protagonist expressed a desire to maintain long hair, a preference that was not shared by her spouse. Additionally, she expressed a wish to possess the forlorn cat encountered in the rain. Furthermore, she expressed a desire to acquire new clothing, indicating a lack of financial independence. During their conversations, the husband displayed a lack of engagement by avoiding eye contact and even requesting her silence, thereby neglecting to address her needs. In response to her husband's apathetic reaction, the woman refrained from verbalising her thoughts and instead chose to maintain silence while gazing out of the window. The woman exhibited traditional characteristics, displaying submissiveness and a familiarity with her husband's indifference. She assumed as a given that she was obligated to comply with her husband's requests. The individual engaged in soliloquy regarding her unattainable aspirations, yet refrained from discussing her desires with her spouse.

Hemingway's portrayal of traditional women in his works has been subject to criticism by readers who argue that these depictions may not accurately represent the broader female experience. However, it is widely acknowledged that Hemingway excels in vividly portraying a distinct category of women known as the new woman. Numerous notable novels penned by the author feature female characters who exhibit distinct qualities: Margot Macomber in *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* (1936), Brett Ashley

in *The Sun Also Rises*, and Catherine Byrne in *The Garden of Eden* (1986). The women were portrayed as new individuals, exhibiting both contemporary physical appearances and behaviours. In terms of their physical appearance, they possessed aesthetically pleasing and appealing features, albeit with a youthful and somewhat boyish demeanour. This was evident through their short hairstyles and their preference for short, straight-cut dresses. In terms of their behaviour, individuals engaged in activities such as playing golf, operating motor vehicles, observing bullfighting events, participating in social dancing with numerous male companions at public establishments, as well as consuming tobacco and alcoholic beverages. In summary, women engaged in activities similar to those of men, while also possessing independent thoughts and pursuing their own interests. They embraced contemporary sexual freedom and, significantly, exercised autonomy in decision-making. The individuals in question failed to acknowledge or take into account the emotional well-being of men, instead regarding them solely as a means to achieve their own objectives. In instances where women lacked financial autonomy, they resorted to leveraging their relationships with men, who would assume the responsibility of covering their expenses when deemed necessary. Among the various female characters depicted by Hemingway, it is undeniable that Brett Ashley stands out as a quintessential representation of them. In accordance with the narrative, Brett Ashley possessed a captivating allure as a flapper, exhibiting

certain boyish qualities: Brett's physical appearance was undeniably striking.

Brett was damned good-looking. She wore a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt, and her hair was brushed back like a boy's. she started all that. She was built with curves like the hull of a racing yacht, and missed none of it with that wool jersey. (Hemingway, 19)

The individual was attired in a slipover jersey jumper and a tweed skirt, while her hair was styled in a manner reminiscent of a male's. The initiation of those actions can be attributed to her. Her physique possessed contours reminiscent of the sleek structure of a high-performance sailing vessel, and you failed to overlook any of its allure due to the wool jersey she was wearing. It is not surprising that the majority of men in her vicinity were drawn to her physical attractiveness. The individual actively engaged in socialising with male companions at public establishments, partaking in both dancing and consuming alcoholic beverages. Additionally, she accompanied them to bullfighting events and received financial resources from these individuals. The protagonist experienced the loss of her spouse during the First World War and subsequently developed a romantic attachment to Jake, an individual who also sustained injuries during the conflict, resulting in his impotence. Despite expressing her love for Jake and likely having genuine feelings for him, she chose not to cohabit with him due to his inability to fulfil her sexual needs. Despite her plans to marry Mike Campbell, she proceeded to accompany Robert Cohn to San Sebastian.

Upon encountering the formidable bullfighter Pedro Remero, who happened to be a decade her junior, she swiftly entered into a romantic liaison with him. In pursuit of her genuine affection, she inflicted harm upon the individuals who harboured feelings for her. During moments of distress or adversity, she sought solace in the presence of Jake, who remained devoted to her and provided emotional support when she required it. Numerous individuals expressed their affection towards her, echoing the sentiments of Count Mippipopolous who remarked, "She is the only lady I have ever known who was as charming when she was drunk as when she was sober." (Hemingway, 52)

Residing alongside women who adhere to traditional values can be somewhat monotonous. Despite their relaxed demeanour, contemporary women exhibited a notable self-centeredness that often led to the disregard of men's emotions and desires. This behaviour bore resemblance to that of a prostitute, rather than that of a supportive spouse. Hemingway's portrayal of women includes a distinct absence of the idealised archetype, thus aligning with our expectations. The female characters who serve as representatives in Ernest Hemingway's novels include Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*, Maria in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), and Renata in *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950). The concept of ideal women, as they were commonly referred to, encompassed the notion of women who embodied perfection. Both individuals possessed contemporary values and adhered

to a set of ethical principles. The individuals in question exhibited characteristics commonly associated with traditional femininity, such as submissiveness, modesty, and self-effacement. Simultaneously, they demonstrated qualities typically associated with strength, bravery, independence, financial self-reliance, and self-sufficiency. Women were afforded equal status to men. Regarding their interactions with men, women expressed a desire to establish harmonious relationships based on genuine love and dedication, thereby minimising conflicts. According to the author, they embodied a remarkable fusion of traditional femininity and modern femininity. Therefore, men held them in high regard and found it easy to coexist with them due to their lack of concern regarding potential emasculation that could arise from the presence of modern women. They served as the epitome of male companionship. Both Catherine Barkley and Brett Ashley exemplify the qualities of ideal women. Catherine Barkley, an English nurse, experienced the loss of her fiancé during the course of World War I. Based on the given account, it is evident that Miss Barkley possessed a notable physical attribute, as she was described as being of considerable height and possessing an aesthetically pleasing appearance. The individual in question possessed fair hair, a tanned complexion, and eyes of a grey hue. In contrast to Brett, the subject possessed her own occupation, exhibited financial autonomy, and demonstrated considerable resilience in confronting adversity. Despite experiencing the loss of her initial romantic

partner, she managed to maintain her emotional stability and sense of direction. The individual experienced a profound sense of sorrow, yet continued to maintain their regular routine. Despite being pregnant, she displayed a resilient demeanour as Henry prepared to return to the front. She reassured him not to be concerned, assuring him that she would take care of all necessary arrangements independently. The protagonist displayed a resolute demeanour and possessed the understanding that anyone could succumb to the pressures of war. However, she maintained her belief that even during an irrational period, expressing love, providing solace, and offering support to one another were inherent human tendencies and essential for persevering through difficult circumstances. Upon developing affection for Frederic Henry, she promptly initiated their romantic connection, displaying a notable absence of reluctance. Furthermore, she occasionally detected Henry's inclination to participate in their shared experiences, as evidenced by his remark, "This is a rotten game we play." (Hemingway, 29) Furthermore, she demonstrated unwavering loyalty to her romantic partner. She possessed the necessary readiness and qualifications to elope with Henry and assist him in the realisation of his aspirational dreams. Finally, her romantic partner was deeply affected by her genuine love and unwavering commitment, leading him to comprehend the essence of true love and acquire the resilience to navigate through emotional pain. Undoubtedly, she served as both Henry's romantic partner and a

valuable mentor and supportive companion. Based on the evocative portrayals of women in Hemingway's literary works, it becomes evident that the female characters therein transcend mere secondary roles, assuming significant narrative prominence. Indeed, these characters assumed significant roles within Hemingway's literary works.

The emergence of the women's movement during the 1960s, alongside the growth of feminist criticism within literature departments, resulted in Hemingway being widely criticised by many scholars. These critics accused him of perpetuating sexist stereotypes in his literary works, leading to his designation as a primary target of their disapproval. Hemingway's portrayal of robust male characters in his novels has often led to allegations of his perceived bias towards these fictional male figures. However, it is important to note that he did not exhibit insensitivity towards women. Furthermore, he did not embody the ideals of conceited male supremacists who extolled the virtues of men due to their immense authority and lamented its decline. Through his portrayal of traditional women, he was able to surpass the limited perspective on women, enabling him to gain a deeper understanding of their anguish and demonstrate empathy towards their experiences of hardship. He possessed the ability to comprehend the manner in which they were subjected to discrimination by individuals who were primarily focused on their own interests, resulting in their near elimination. Hemingway consistently supported and advocated for these women

who had been subjected to victimisation. The analysis of the protagonist's attitude in the short story *Cat in the Rain* provides a clear understanding. Despite the man's assertive and emotionally detached demeanour, the woman felt empowered to openly communicate her personal experiences as a woman, articulating her desires and expressing her confusion to her husband. Finally, one of her aspirations was realised as she acquired the feline companion. Doesn't this suggest Hemingway's empathy towards her? Upon adopting an alternative perspective while engaging with Hemingway's literary works, numerous misconceptions surrounding the author can be effectively dispelled. What were Hemingway's thoughts regarding the second category of women who possessed physical beauty and allure, yet lacked the ability or, more precisely, the willingness to fulfil men's desires? The portrayal of female characters in the novels was characterised by their charm, which captivated the male characters and engendered a sense of obsession within them. However, the women failed to fulfil their requirements and instead exploited them. Therefore, certain readers held the perception that the female characters depicted by Hemingway were derogatorily labelled as bitches, leading to the inference that Hemingway harboured deep-seated misogynistic beliefs. Furthermore, it can be argued that it was an error. The portrayal of women in Hemingway's works is characterised by a complex and contradictory nature, rendering them enigmatic and challenging for men to comprehend. Consequently, Hemingway

himself exhibited ambivalence towards these multifaceted female characters. Hemingway advocated for the empowerment and emancipation of women. He held a high regard for contemporary women due to their remarkable determination in achieving their personal aspirations, and commended their non-conventional actions. From this perspective, it can be argued that Hemingway exhibited a certain degree of support for feminism. However, it is important to acknowledge that Hemingway experienced a sense of disgust and apprehension towards these emerging women. The individuals in question exhibited notable strength, assertiveness, and autonomy, thereby projecting a sense of masculinity. He harboured concerns that these women possessed such formidable character traits that they had the potential to undermine or diminish the masculinity of men. Consequently, he was characterised as dissolute, severe, and deleterious, ultimately leading to their downfall and the forfeiture of their authority. However, the assertion that Hemingway was a misogynist lacks substantial evidence and is an unjust characterization of Hemingway. He engaged in acts of aggression towards both females and males. Occasionally, his primary focus was not directed towards women themselves, but rather towards the inclination of men to exhibit submissiveness and dependency in relation to women. Similar to the character of Robert Cohn, who harboured profound affection for Brett but ultimately received no reciprocation and suffered the loss of his close friend Jake, who disdained him for his

submissive nature towards Brett. Ernest Hemingway crafted idealised female characters. Given their idealised nature, it is challenging to identify any flaws within them. Hemingway expressed admiration for these women, extolling their qualities of gentleness, tenderness, faithfulness, as well as their bravery and unwavering resolve. Hemingway exhibited nonconformity to traditional norms. Upon his depiction of the archetypal female figure, he discerned the inherent disparities between the genders, yet concurrently developed an evolving comprehension that they were not entirely dichotomous. The individual in question was endeavouring to maintain equilibrium within the relationship. The individual held the belief that there existed a shared human nature among them, characterised by a mutual inclination to persist in existence through the means of communication and mutual support. The concept of the ideal woman brought contentment to Hemingway, much like how Catherine Barkley brought fulfilment to Henry, thereby representing complementary counterparts. It is well-documented that Catherine Barkley's demise was attributed to haemorrhage. Certain individuals may raise objections regarding Hemingway's admiration for these idealised female characters, questioning why he did not provide them with a favourable outcome. This could potentially be attributed to the fact that the artist demonstrated empathy towards traditional women in his portrayals, thereby indicating his lack of indifference towards their plight. The artist's portrayal of new women exhibited ambivalence, as he simultaneously held both admiration and

apprehension towards their non-conformist actions. While he acknowledged and respected their defiance of traditional gender roles, he also harboured concerns regarding the potential dominance of their power over that of men. However, it can be argued that he did not exhibit misogynistic tendencies. When the creator devised the concept of an ideal woman, it can be inferred that he held the belief that a harmonious and reciprocated love serves as a viable means to circumvent the pitfalls of an unsatisfactory marital union. To a significant degree, it can be observed that he harboured a certain level of aversion, specifically towards women, particularly those who were unfamiliar to him. However, it is noteworthy that his concept of a complementary union coincided with feminist ideology.

Hemingway's portrayal of women also encompasses a perceptible presence of violence and warfare. Passion can be regarded as a manifestation of intense self-centeredness and individual fulfilment. When egoism becomes a governing principle, the inevitable consequence is the presence of violence. The dynamics in Hemingway's works revolve around the power struggle between partners, where one seeks to assert dominance over the other, leaving no room for equality or compromise. There is an absence of compromise. The intensity of emotions can momentarily impair the perception of individuals, preventing them from accurately perceiving the current circumstances. The Hemingway protagonist, as well as his female lead Catherine, both exemplify the concept of

the Hemingway hero. In the novel *A Farewell to Arms*, Catherine's character embodies the initial phase of this archetype. The individual in question has experienced the loss of her betrothed partner. The protagonist encounters Henry, leading to a gradual intensification of their involvement in an inadvertent emotional attachment. The individual ultimately succumbs to mortality during the process of giving birth. The character of Brett in Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises* can be seen as a representation of what Catherine Barkley, the female protagonist in *A Farewell to Arms*, might have become had she not met her untimely demise within the confines of the novel. The individual in question exhibits advanced age, has experienced additional traumatic events, has encountered difficulties in maintaining stability, and has undergone significant psychological distress, resulting in the manifestation of symptoms associated with nymphomania. It is postulated that only a robust and grounded individual such as Romero possesses the capacity to rescue her from her current state. Brett has successfully recuperated and assumed the identity of Mrs. Morgan from *To Have and Have Not*. Mrs. Morgan exhibits several notable similarities with Brett, which appear to be more than mere coincidences. The individual in question has opted for a bobbed hairstyle and has dyed it blonde. Additionally, she adorns a hat that is reminiscent of the style worn by Brett, and her age aligns with what Brett's age would have been. Previously, she had engaged in a sexually indiscriminate lifestyle, a fact that Morgan is cognizant of. The individual in

question possesses exclusively female offspring, prompting speculation as to whether the male offspring may have desired to disassociate themselves from her prior to their marriage.

Conclusion

In Hemingway's works, the female figure serves as a representation of the concept of home. The tragedy lies in her perpetual inability to discover a sense of belonging or establish a permanent residence. She consistently encounters an inhospitable and unsympathetic environment characterised by both physical devastation and emotional strain. Catherine, Dorothy, Haris, and Renata all yearn for a residence that is unattainable to them. Therefore, Hemingway demonstrates in his novels a profound understanding of the multifaceted aspects of feminine psychology. In addition to his skillful portrayal of female characters, they serve as a catalyst for societal reflection and advocate for the liberation of women from oppressive constraints. These texts serve to highlight the plight and exploitation experienced by women, shedding light on the challenges they face that are not insurmountable, despite their severity. Additionally, it is argued that women ought to demonstrate greater agency and actively engage in efforts to overcome their current challenges, rather than succumbing to or resigning themselves to what is commonly referred to as fate.

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