

Women Identities' Portrayal in Two Hemingway's Selected Short Stories

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Abstract: Previous studies on Hemingway are mostly about his major novels. The writer of the article therefore chose another form of Hemingway's works, those are short stories. This article argues that it is important to read Hemingway's works with the knowledge about his own complex characters. By reading the biographies, reader will learn more about Hemingway both as a man and a legend and his treatment to his female characters. This article intends to indicate to the readers that it is important to connect Hemingway's theme about women identities in his stories to his own life because many parallels have been drawn.

Keywords: identities, portrayal, Hemingway

INTRODUCTION

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) is one of the greatest American writers, and he is also the writer who always depicts life and women in his works. His women characters fall into one of the two categories, either that of the bitch who threatens to rob the male's strength, or that of the dream girl, a mindless creature who makes no demands upon her man and who exists only to satisfy his sexual needs. Both creatures are regarded as the product of masculine sensibility. There are certain elements in his works that refuse to be fitted into that formula. We need to refine our conception of his treatment of women and the implications of that treatment.

Hemingway took the big subjects, love, war, the knowledge of death and wrote about them through the eyes of a man who was both sensitive and brave. He had great style. His outdoor lifestyle led him to casual clothes that naturally suited him. He was a connoisseur of food and wine. He understood and loved guns, especially hunting weapons. Almost as soon as he became famous for his writing, he became famous for his lifestyle. It was a potent mixture and the press loved him, he became the first jet-set celebrity, long before the term was coined.

This article argues that it is important to read his works with the knowledge about his own complex character. From reading the biographies, readers will learn more about Hemingway both as a man and a legend. Learning more of the personal life of a legend has made us appreciate him as a man. The writer of the article observes that in his short stories, his female characters are few yet his female characters are important. It is important therefore to analyse these female characters in order to give the balance view on Hemingway who is not only as a macho writer but also he cares about the women's world. His female characters

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seemed depressed and have a big burden on their shoulders. They look happy but actually they are not. From the reading of Hemingway's short stories and his biographies, they are always in line with the author's experiences in the real life, in other words, it seems that he writes his stories after he did or experienced something.

METHODS

The desire to read excellent fiction by fascinating author, and moreover a common interest in supplementing the article with biographical approach is attempted to achieve a better understanding of Hemingway's stories and authorship. Here the writer uses biographical approach since there are obvious parallels between Hemingway's themes of stories to his own life. Biographies and biographical approach are the most suitable data and tool to see the traces of Hemingway. Biographical information provides the practical assistance of underscoring subtle and important meaning in the stories.

The material objects of the study are two short stories of Hemingway and the female characters are chosen by the writer of the article as the item of analysis because they are not only as supporting characters but they are important characters. According to Wellek and Warren in *Theory of Literature* (1963), the biographical approach actually obscures a proper comprehension of the literary process, since it breaks up the order of literary tradition to substitute the life-cycle of an individual. A work of art may rather embody the 'dream' of an author than his actual life, or it may be the 'mask', the 'anti-self' behind which his real person is hiding, or it may be a picture of the life from which the author wants to escape (p. 78). Thus, there is a person behind the work. The author's work may be a mask, but it is frequently a conventionalization of his own experiences, his own life. Furthermore, Wellek and Warren added that the biographical framework will also help us in studying the growth, maturing, and possible decline of an author's art. Biography also accumulates the materials for other questions of literary history such as the reading of the poet, his personal associations with literary men, his travels, the landscape and cities he saw and lived in. Biographical data should amplify the meaning of the text, not drown it out with irrelevant material. Biographical approach focuses on explicating the literary work by using the insight provided knowledge of the author's life.

According to *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature: Fourth Edition*, the historical-biographical approach can be defined as the approach that "sees a literary work chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of the author's life and times or the life and times of the characters in the work" (Guerin, 1998). Understanding the social structure or way of life of a certain time period give the reader a greater knowledge base from which to draw conclusions and better understand of the story. Discovering details about the author's life and times also provide similar ways to further develop ideas about a story.

To establish and understand the author's work deeply, besides using the textual reading and all the available information about the facts of the author's life, such as author's biographies while reading the stories, the article writer uses the theory of identity to see the uniqueness of Hemingway's point of view in narrating those women identities' themes both in his works and in his real life.



RESULTS

The traditional system based upon the opposition masculine/feminine only reinforces stereotypes and favours a dominant/dominated dualism. Hemingway, the writer who most unambiguously “gave us male definitions of manhood to ponder” (Spilka, 1999:29), has to be buried in order to resurrect a new writer whose gender identity can be used to unmask patriarchy. As Barlowe (2000:148) points out, Hemingway has become “a valuable site for studying the contested, fraught, and interesting late nineteenth century and twentieth century history of gender in the United States.”

It is evident that Hemingway wrought a self-image as he-man of American letters, the writer who created an exclusively male preserve – athletes, prize fighters, sportsmen, killers – a world of ‘men without women,’ were outdated models of heroism, though extinct in a highly industrialized country, were still incessantly sought and worshipped: ‘Hemingway is the modern primitive ... the frontiersman of the loins, heart and biceps, the stoic Red Indian minus traditions, scornful of the past, bare of sentimentality, catching the muscular life in a plain and muscular prose’ (Fadiman, 1997:126). This image of male identity, which faithfully reproduced all the stereotypical traits assigned to the gender role, automatically granted Hemingway a niche in American patriarchy. In the forties and fifties, the decades during which homosexuality was diagnosed as a psychological disorder latent in a high proportion of citizens (Sinfield, 1994:212-219), Hemingway was hailed as the embodiment of manliness which Americans needed in order to recover the lost confidence in traditional values. In a way, Hemingway demonstrated that it was possible to be a writer and ‘a full-size man,’ despite some critics’ nagging suspicious (Eastman, 1997:131). It is then to see to what extent Hemingway articulated the male code he never stopped celebrating.

If gender is a changing cultural construct, nothing remains stable, and the whole array of attributes which draw the line between masculine and feminine gets suspended or cancelled. Either we have to look at ourselves in the mirror to search for new values which revalidate our gender identity so as to overcome the feeling of emptiness caused by the temporary cancellation of the binaries, or we can choose to break down the dichotomy masculine/feminine with the aim of denaturalizing gender. Hemingway seems to be ideologically trapped in this dilemma: on the one hand, his fear of losing stability made him yearn for a world in which normative gender binaries were automatically reinscribed, that is, men and women were to be genitalized again. Women must wear long hair, be affective mothers and wives, and remain indoors; men, in turn, must defend and protect them, and be brave and stalwart fighters.

The growing masculinization of women which the outbreak of the First World War brought to the Western World (women incorporated into the labor market caused the gradual obliteration of gender-based signs of traditional feminine identity: hair, dress, behaviour, etc.) can only entail a parallel process tinged with no less imminent dangers: the emasculation of men. The tragic result is a modern world dominated by the inversion of gender roles and, therefore, the most widespread disease of modernity is none other than sterility. Women cannot beget children either because they do not find suitable partners to mate with or because they do not want to, thus unfulfilling what heretofore seemed to be an



inevitable biological law. And, unfortunately for Hemingway, men are also losing a part of their manly as this is a value no longer in demand by strong, empowered women who have decided to fulfil their roles by themselves in a new regenerated society. As Reynolds notes, Oak Park, the hometown which became a synonym of morality and traditional values, “remains beneath the surface, invisible and inviolate [in his narrative]. It was his first world, the world he lost, not to the war, but to modern times” (1986:5).

DISCUSSION

We take a look at the first story, ‘Cat in the Rain’. Hemingway uses the technique by not giving the wife character a name. It shows her unimportance role in the story. She needs to feel loved and important in her relationship with George so that there will be some type of change in her life that will make their commitment to each other last. She needs more compassion in her life, so she seeks this by pursuing change through such things as a cat, hairstyle, and clothing. A cat may symbolize loyalty and love, and a new hairstyle and wardrobe show her strive for an appearance that would attract her husband. The story starts with the sentence “There were only two American stopping at the hotel” introducing the two main characters. The fact that it is just their nationality that is indicated and that they are not mentioned by name is a hint of a lack of individuality. The following line “They did not know any of the people they passed on the stairs on their way to and from their room” stresses the isolation and anonymity that shadows them.

Being right in front of the hotel and the public garden symbolize isolation as well as loneliness and unhappiness of the woman who is standing at the window looking out into the world. Standing at the window of the hotel-room looking out in the rain while her husband is reading, the ‘American wife’ spots a cat, which is crouched under a table. On the spur of the moment she decides to protect that cat from the rain even though she will get wet. It is the spontaneous reaction of the woman after she saw that cat. Usually only children want to protect cats or dogs from the rain, because a grown-up knows that rain does not do any harm to animals living on the street. From that point the article writer can find an interpretation which is quite complex and not that easy to explain. On the one hand, the woman the woman wants to protect that little cat, like a baby. So, she wants to protect that vulnerable thing, which is more the behaviour of an adult. But on the other hand, she acts like a little child by having this wish for a cat. Another hint for that is that the woman is referred to as ‘girl’ in the following paragraph, not as ‘wife’ like before. The ambition of saving a cat from the rain is a childish behaviour that even becomes strengthened by her saying that ‘it isn’t any fun to be a poor kitty out in the rain’. This obviously builds up a parallel between the woman and the helpless cat. In the first place, children use to identify themselves with pets, but indeed this can be transferred to the woman’s life. Looking for love and closeness, for tenderness and someone who needs her, it seems as though her process of self-discovery has not finished yet, which makes her unsure of herself.

The sequence in which we get to know that she likes the hotelkeeper a lot is next. She likes the way he wants to serve her. Why? Because it gives her the feeling to be grown up, to be treated like a lady. But the other reasons for fancying him originate from a more childish thinking, like the fact that she likes him because of his big hands. To underline this

childish behaviour, all sentences in this part begin with “She liked...”, which is the typical way of a child to want something. When she talks about the cat in this situation, she does not say “cat” but “kitty”, which is usually a childish expression as well. The next sentence that seems to be important is, “The padrone made her feel very small and at the same time very important. She had a momentary feeling of being of great importance” (Hemingway 169). At this point the article writer can see again the two parts of her personality. The child in her feels very timid because of the presence of this tall, old, serious man, the woman in her feels flattered by the way he cares for her. She seems to be like a girl of teenage, still being a child and now slowly noticing the woman inside her.

The identity crisis of the woman is stressed by the following scene in which the woman expresses that she is dissatisfied with her looking like a boy’s. She manifests herself by expressing her desires for not only a female hairstyle but also “a kitty to sit on her lap and purr when she strokes her”, her “own silver”, “candles”, “new clothes”, and so on. All these are symbols of femininity, a home and maybe also a hidden wish to become a mother, aspects she misses in her marriage. From this point on she is called a “wife” again, underlining that she became conscious of she wants. “And I want it to be spring” may not only be a reference to the bad weather but also means that she wants it to be spring in their relationship again. However, she knows that all her wishes are nearly unrealizable, saying “If I can’t have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat” underlines the central position of this certain desire.

Move to the second story, “The Sea Change” is a story in which Phil experiences separation from his girlfriend because she is going away with a lesbian. Although Hemingway also writes on the theme of women’s crisis identity in “Cat in the Rain”, “The Sea Change”, unlike “Cat in the Rain”, steps into the male protagonist’s consciousness and depicts the transformation of his sexual identity. As he discusses their relationship in a bar, Phil confronts his own “perversion” that he unconsciously had in their sexual practices. The girl asks, “You don’t think things we’ve had and done should make any difference in understanding?” (Hemingway 399). Phil mentions that what they did is “vice”, quoting Pope’s verse of which he remembers only a part, “Vice is a monster of such fearful mien,” the young man said bitterly, “that to be something or other needs but to seen. Then we something, something, then embrace”. He could not remember the words. “I can’t quote”, he said (Hemingway 399). Pope seems to be saying that while the mere sight of “vice” is hateful, repeated exposure to it prompt us to first tolerate it, then to feel sorry for those who engaged in it, and finally to welcome it into our own lives. When Phil renames it “perversion”, the girl, although refusing to call it either “vice” or “perversion”, reassures that what Phil names “perversion” is all they have done, “We’re made up all sorts of things. “You’ve known that. You’ve used it well enough” (Hemingway 400). Finally, he accepts the “perversion” as his own by letting the girl go with her lesbian lover.

Regarding this, Bennett suggests that the story is about the crisis of Phil’s heterosexual identity in which he has “lost his sexual identity” (242). In his interpretation of “The Sea Change”, however, Bennett suggests that “the one logical sexual activity in which Phil and the girl could have engaged that would enable Phil in any way to ‘understand’ the girl’s lesbian urges would be cunnilingus” (232). The article writer should not totally

agree with Bennett's argument because oral sex should not be taken as a prototype of lesbian love making. In this sense, Hemingway may assume the girl's preference of that certain sexual activity which, in Phil's consciousness, characterizes her and his own "lesbianism". When the girl mentions that she will come back to Phil in the future, her sexual transgression indicates her preference of a certain sexual act rather than a change in her object-choice. Her trespass between the homo/heterosexual boundaries, therefore, obscures the distinction between homo and heterosexual sexual practices. Attributing her first experience of what Phil comes to understand as a "lesbian" sexual act to her heterosexual relations with Phil, then participating in it through her relationship with the lesbian lover, and finally relocating this act to her heterosexual relations once again, she deconstructs the distinction between heterosexual sexual practices and lesbian sexual practices.

On the contrary, Phil seeks the "truth" of his sexuality and finds his sexual transformation in the mirror which reflects "quite a different looking man": his "lesbian" body depresses his masculinity. The girl's preference for "lesbian" sex, which was merely one of the heterosexual sexual variation they had enjoyed until the girl declared her desire for another woman, now becomes the evidence of her homosexuality, and also proves Phil's status as "the girl's 'first girl'" (Bennett 236). In his consciousness, his heterosexual relationship with the girl turns out to have been the parody of a lesbian relationship, and lesbianism becomes the "truth" of their parodic physical activities. Consequently, he re-identifies himself in despair with it, that is, a homosexual subject that depresses his masculinity. Phil discovers his own homosexual body which brings about his gender identity crisis.

In doing the analysis, the main information is gained from three biographers, Lynn, Baker and Meyers. From Lynn's 1987 provocative account of the writer's androgynous experiences, biographies on Hemingway, fuelled by the postmodernist tenet that any system of domination must be destabilized, have largely contributed to the demise of patriarchal values. The goal has always been to demonstrate the following principle: gender binaries – masculine and feminine – are cultural categories which must be denaturalized. Hemingway was presumably interested in recovering, or looked back with nostalgia on, long gone or debilitated values, and this necessarily involved reinstating the strict Victorian gender division. Yet both his childhood experiences – the roles enacted by his parents – and the world that emerged after World War I openly contradicted what the young artist desperately believed to be an infallible principle. The modern age Hemingway woke up to one morning simply validated Marx's old conviction that "all that is solid melts in the air" (quoted in Tallack, 1991:15). Gender roles as God-given and Darwin-selected categories, characterized by a set of invariable natural attitudes, were inevitably the first to crumble.

Baker's classic biography, one in which documentation prevails over interpretation, was completed before the opening of the writer's posthumous papers in 1975 and the housing of the collection at the Kennedy Library, Boston in 1980. Baker dedicates pages to the novelist's childhood and adolescent years, and eschews any interpretation which could give a fixed pattern to the mosaic of the subject's life. He is the first to tell us that Ernest and his older sister Marcelline were dressed alike (pink gingham dresses and flower ornamented hats) during the boy's first months, and that the child was given dolls to play with, but he

hastens to add that as early as 1900 (when he was barely one year-old!) ‘‘he began to assert his boyhood ... in an environment ideally suited to manly endeavors’’ (Baker, 1972). The last trace of troubling femininity (the long hair or the Dutch-boy haircut his mother adored) was abandoned when he entered first grade, i.e. at the age of six.

Certainly, we move closer to interpretation with Meyers’s *Hemingway: A Biography* (1985). Meyers explain Grace Hemingway’s determination to have her children appear as twins as the direct consequence of the Victorian era’s fashion to dress boys in girls’ clothing, but he apprises us that Ernest was dressed in lace-trimmed dresses until three, a fact that Lynn (1987:38-40) will later demonstrate to be statistically unusual: only twenty per cent of boys in the age group between one and two remained indistinguishable from little girls; after the age of two, the percentage was five per cent or less. Ernest’s education did not therefore fit into the average American family’s formula but into his mother’s peculiar twinning of her children. Meyers soon identifies the clash between the two stereotypical gender roles Ernest grows up with: on the one hand, Ed, the father, a natural-born hunter, woodsman and sportsman brought up in the manly tradition; on the other, Grace, the mother, the sensitive artist, the opera singer whose career was partly sacrificed for the sake of rearing her children.

Yet the conflict between both personalities soon explodes. Ed is nervous, weak, cowardly and insecure. He makes less money than his wife, likes cooking, is unable to impose his criteria on home affairs and is barely allowed to make any important decision. Much to the contrary, Grace is firm, strong, daring and domineering. Meyers interprets this inversion of the gender roles as the driving force of Ernest’s conflicting personality. As he later identified himself with his father, who also committed suicide, and saw his mother as the root of evil, he associated Grace’s world with a destructive, emasculating power. As a result, he equated art and culture ‘‘with the aesthetes of the 1890’s, with homosexual and with sissified music pupils of his mother’’ (Meyers 1985:17). The only way to escape from this castrating influence was to suppress ‘‘the sensitive side of his nature’’ and to assert his masculinity through the resurrection of the father’s image: ‘‘He wrote about the Indians and violence of Michigan, rather than the stuffy culture of Oak Park, because he wished to remember and recreate his father’s world’’ (Meyers 1985: 17).

CONCLUSION

Researchers have found that those who have made a strong commitment to an identity tend to be happier and healthier than those who have not. Those with a status of identity diffusion tend to fell out of place in the world and do not pursue a sense of identity. Exploring different aspects of oneself in the different areas of life, including the role at work, within the family, and in romantic relationships, can help strengthen the personal identity.

The theme of identity touches clearly two issues. First, we saw a woman who seeks for the femininity and even motherliness. Women in Hemingway’s stories extends to seeing the child as precious, get readers’ sympathies, whereas the man’s flat literalness insults female characters and alienates readers. Throughout the story the woman repeatedly attempts to get the man to see the emotional costs of the abortion or not having a child. Woman is not weak, as their sarcasm makes clear that woman is seeking diversion and digression. Second, we see a male character who depicts the transformation of his sexual identity. He seeks the



“truth” of his sexuality and he finds also that his girlfriend is a lesbian. From the two problems of identity, we see that to have an identity as the human being is a very important matter no matter who you are.

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