

Misconceptions about Women in Hemingway's Novels

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Abstract

Ernest Hemingway depicted a lot of male characters who were always very strong either in body or in spirit, such as Santiago (in "THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA") whereas the women in his novels are always neglected, but when going further with his works, many indispensable women in his novels were found, in contrast to men. This paper deals mainly with three different types of women in Hemingway's works, his attitudes towards them and an analysis of why he had such attitudes towards them.

Keywords

Misconceptions, Women, Hemingway, Novels

Introduction

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), one of the world-famous American writers in the 20th century, is still remembered by many people nearly 60 years after his death and his works are still studied by many scholars. Whenever Ernest Hemmingway is mentioned, it always conjures up an image of a man of iron just as the men he depicted in his novels, such as Santiago and Robert Jordan (in "FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS"), who believes: "Man is not made for defeat; a man can be destroyed, but not defeated." (Hemingway, 1952) He always depicted in his novels such kinds of activities as hunting, bullfighting and fishing, which belong to a man's world; the public has made "Papa Hemingway" synonymous with a stereotypical notion of masculinity. But we often neglect or misunderstand his depictions of different women in his novels. Hemingway's novels and his own legendary life also make readers think he was indifferent to women and had "growing antagonism" (Scott, 2000) towards them. Some critics even declared that "Hemingway could not depict women or he was better at depicting men without women" (Scott, 2000), and the critics simply divided his fictional women into either castrators or love-slavers, either bitches or helpmates, either demons or angels. In their eyes, these women were just appendages of men's. These criticisms unquestionably diminish Hemingway's literary reputation and his personal charm. However, if readers pay careful attention to the details of his novels, without any prejudice, the simplicity of the dichotomy would be found, which seemed to mirror Hemingway's own sexist

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mind-set, is a complete misunderstanding of Hemingway's real attitudes towards women. Readers will also find that Hemingway vividly created different types of women with depth and strength in his novels, and his attitudes towards women were not so simple as we once thought. So, in this paper the author will mainly discuss three types of women, Hemingway's complex attitudes towards them and the causes of those attitudes.

Three Types of Women and their Representatives

Generally speaking, when analyzing the women characters in Hemingway's novels, the author divides them into three groups, according to different social gender patterns and the women's own character: traditional woman, new woman and ideal woman. It is not so difficult to find these different women in his novels.

Traditional Woman

Represented by the women in his short stories such as "CAT IN THE RAIN", "INDIAN CAMP", "MR.AND MRS.ELLIOT" and "THE DOCTOR AND THE DOCTOR' S WIFE", this type of women were always depicted to be women with purity, piety, domesticity and submissiveness, which were called the "cardinal virtues" (Barbara, 1966) of true womanhood by Barbara Welter. These women were not independent and always relied on men. They stood not beside men but behind men, indifferent and insensitive to them, responding passively to their needs. Hemingway did not describe these women in great depth and he wrote more about men in these stories. The women did not even have names. Of course, it is only Hemingway's method of describing them, but it more or less shows their subjugated position.

When we read "CAT IN THE RAIN", readers can understand this type of woman more deeply and thoroughly. The American woman and her husband George were in a hotel. The husband was always reading his books. The woman talked to her dear husband about her thoughts and her needs. She wanted to wear her hair long which her husband did not like; she wanted to have the pitiful cat in the rain; she wanted to have some new clothes (obviously, she was not independent in finance). When she talked, her husband did not look at her and even asked her to shut up, let alone satisfy her needs. As to her husband's indifferent response, the woman said nothing but just kept silent and looked out of the window. She was a traditional woman, submissive, also accustomed to her husband's indifference. She took it for granted that she should do whatever her husband asked her to do. So, she was just talking to herself about her dreams that could not come true, but not to her husband about her needs.

New Woman

Readers may criticize Hemingway for his depiction of traditional women as not so representative, but they can say nothing against his vivid depictions of the second type of women—new woman. In many of his famous novels we can find new women: Margot Macomber in "THE SHORT HAPPY LIFE OF FRANCIS MACOMBER", Brett Ashley in "THE SUN ALSO RISES" and Catherine Byrne in "THE GARDEN OF EDEN". Depicted as new women, they were modern in appearance and behavior. In appearance, they were good-looking, attractive, but boyish—they had

short hair, wore short straight-cut dresses. In behavior, they played golf, drove cars, watched bullfights, danced with many men in pubs, smoked and drank. In a word, they did whatever men did; they also had their own thoughts and pursuits, they embraced modern sexual promiscuity and most importantly, they decided for themselves. They did not give consideration to men's feelings but just treated them as a tool to fulfill their pursuits. For example, they were not financially independent, so they took advantage of men and the men paid the bill for them if necessary. Of all the new women Hemingway described, Brett Ashley, no doubt is an epitome of them.

As described in the novel, Brett Ashley was an appealing flapper in many ways and she was also boyish: "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 you missed none of it with that wool jersey." (Hemingway, 1994).

No wonder, most men around her were attracted by her beauty. She danced and drank with men in pubs, watched bullfights with them, got money from them. She lost her husband in World War I and fell in love with Jake, a man who was also wounded in that war and became impotent. Though she said she loved Jake and she probably really loved him, she did not live with Jake because he could not satisfy her in sex. She was going to marry Mike Campell but still went to San Sebastian with another man Robert Cohn. When she saw the strong bullfighter Pedro Remero, who was ten years younger than her, she was in relationship with him soon. For her own true love, she hurt the men who loved her and when she felt terrible or was in trouble, she again turned to Jake who still loved her and would comfort her when she needed him. So many men loved her, just as Count Mippipopolous said, "She is the only lady I have ever known who was as charming when she was drunk as when she was sober." (Hemingway, 1994)

Ideal Woman

Living with such traditional women is a little boring. Although modern new women were easygoing, they were so self-centered that they always neglected men's feelings and needs and they were somewhat like a prostitute but not a good wife. Hemingway did not disappoint us by creating the third type of women—ideal women. Their representatives are Catherine Barkley in "A FAREWELL TO ARMS", Maria in "FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS", and Renata in "ACROSS THE RIVER AND INTO THE TREES". Ideal women, just as they were called, were perfect women. They were both modern and principled. They were submissive, modest, self-effacing like traditional women and they were also strong, brave, independent, self-reliant in finance and self-contained. They enjoyed equal status with men. As to the relationship with men, they desired to get along harmoniously with men with their true love and dedication and thus avoiding conflicting with them. So, it is the opinion of the author that they were the wonderful combination of traditional women and new women. Thus men admired them, felt comfortable to live with them because they did not have the fear of emasculation that may be brought by new women. They were men's ideal companions. Catherine Barkley, as well as Brett Ashley, is characteristic of ideal women.

Catherine Barkley was an English nurse who lost her fiancé in World War I. From the description, we know she was also very beautiful: “Miss Barkley was quite tall. She...was blonde and had a tawny skin and gray eyes.” (Hemingway, 1994) But unlike Brett, she had her own job and she was financially independent and she was very strong when facing unhappiness. Though she lost her first true lover, she did not lose her bearings. She was very sorrowful but she lived on as usual. Though she was pregnant when Henry had to return to the front, she still smiled and comforted him not to be worried and she would arrange all the things herself. She was firm and she knew “Anybody may crack” (Hemingway, 1994) in the war, but she still believed that even in an irrational era, to love each other, to comfort and encourage each other was human nature and also a basis of living on in adversity. So, when she fell in love with Frederic Henry, she established their relationship without any hesitation, she even could feel Henry’s attempt of joining in the fun on occasion: “This is a rotten game we play.” (Hemingway, 1994) She was also very faithful to her lover. She was ready and qualified to run away with Henry and to help him realize his wishful dreams. At last her lover was moved by her true love and dedication which enable him to realize what was true love and how to live on with hurt. No doubt, she was not only Henry’s lover but also a good teacher and helpful friend of his.

From these vivid descriptions of women, we know women in Hemingway’s novels were not just some characters that were secondary to men. In fact, they played important roles in Hemingway’s novels.

Hemingway’s Attitudes towards Them

Hemingway depicted these different important women in his novels, then what was his view on them?

With the rise of feminism in the 1960s and of feminist criticism in the department of literature in the 1970s, Hemingway became Enemy Number One for many critics who accused him of his sexist mind-set and defending traditional social gender roles. But is it justice to say so? Did Hemingway really so abhor women as they criticized? Of course, it is not so simple. To different women, he had different attitudes.

To Traditional Women

Because Hemingway described many strong men in his novels, he was always accused of siding with his fictional males. But in fact, he was not a man that was insensitive to women. Nor was he a representative of arrogant male supremacists who sang the praises of men for their great power and were grieved for losing it. When he portrayed traditional women, he transcended the narrow view on women to see clearly their bitterness and sympathize with them in their sufferings. He could understand how they were discriminated by the self-concerned men and almost squeezed out to the edge of death. Hemingway was standing by these victimized women all along.

From the short story “CAT IN THE RAIN”, we can know his attitude clearly. Though the man was opinionated and sternly cool and unmoved, the woman could speak out freely to express

her experience as a woman and told her husband her desires and her perplexity. At last, one of her dreams came true—she got the cat. Isn't that an indication of Hemingway's sympathy for her?

So, when we read his works from a different angle, many misunderstandings towards Hemingway can be cleared up.

To New Women

Then what did Hemingway think about the second type of women who were beautiful and attractive but could not or, to be exact, were not willing to meet men's needs? In his novels, the new women were charming and men were obsessed by them. But the women did not meet their needs and just took advantage of them. Thus, some readers thought these new women he described were bitches, and it showed Hemingway was a strong misogynist. It was also a mistake. As new women were always full of contradiction, very complicated and difficult for men to understand, Hemingway was also ambivalent to them.

Hemingway stood for giving women freedom and liberation. He respected new women for their great determination of realizing their own goals and praised their anti-traditional behaviors. From this side, we can say Hemingway was in favor of feminism to some extent.

But we also should admit, to these new women, Hemingway felt somewhat disgusted and he was a little afraid of them. They were so strong, aggressive and they did what they wanted and seemed manly. So he was afraid that these women would be so strong in character that could probably weaken or even deprive men of their manliness. Therefore, he described as dissolute, harsh and destructive and at last they were in trouble and lost their power.

But simply thinking that Hemingway was a misogynist cannot hold water at all and it is also unfair to Hemingway.

He was attacking not only women but also men. Sometimes his main target was not women but men's submissiveness to and dependence on women. Just as Robert Cohn who loved Brett deeply but got nothing at all and lost his good friend—Jake, who looked down upon him for his submissiveness to Brett.

To Ideal Women

Hemingway created ideal women. Since they were idealized, we can hardly find fault with them. Hemingway spoke highly of these women by appreciating their gentleness, tenderness faithfulness and also bravery and unswerving determination.

Hemingway was not a totally traditional man. When he portrayed ideal women, he realized the difference between men and women, but he also gradually came to understand that they were not completely opposite. So, he was trying to balance the relationship. He believed that they had common human nature—desiring to live on by communicating with and encouraging each other. Ideal women satisfied Hemingway, just as Catherine Barkley satisfied Henry, which were complementary opposites.

We know Catherine Barkley died of haemorrhage. Some people may object that since Hemingway appreciated these ideal women, why did he not give them a good end? Doesn't that mean "the only good woman was a dead one" (Scott, 2000)? No! Anyone who lost lover will be very sorrowful. In love stories or movies, we can come across this kind of dialogue:

A: My dear, I'd like you die before me.

B: Why? (with anger)

A: Because if I die before you, you must be very sad, I hope you are happy forever.

Henry loved Catherine, so when he lost his ideal love and the son, he must be very sad. So, it is exact to say, Hemingway was intending to imply that men could not avoid losing "the happiness of the garden that a man must lose." (Scott, 2000).

Causes of his Complex Attitudes

But what are the reasons of his complex attitudes? There are two main reasons.

Hemingway's Own Life Experience

Hemingway was one of the authors that experienced two world wars. In World War I, he was a Red Cross ambulance driver in Italy and then was badly wounded in Fossalta July 8 while distributing chocolate and cigarettes to troops. While recuperating in Milan, he met and fell in love with nurse Agnes von Kurowsky, but when he returned to the United States, he was rejected by her so became depressed. Then in 1920, his mother, Grace Hall Hemingway, a talented singer and music teacher, left him and his father from Windemere shortly after his twenty-first birthday to pursue her own artistic and occupational interests in music and painting. No doubt, it was another shock brought about by a woman. Thus, we can understand why Hemingway sometimes felt a little hostile towards women. But his love for his mother never lessened. According to Baker who wrote "ERNEST HEMINGWAY: A LIFE STORY", he hated two women in his life: his mother and his third wife Martha. He resented his mother's domineering manner but was deeply grateful to her for bestowing excellent artistic talent on him.

As to Hemingway's marriages, some facts should be mentioned. He got married four times in his life: Hadley Richardson, Pauline Pfeiffer, Matha Gellhorn and Mary. The first wife Hadley and the fourth Mary belonged to ideal women. Hadley firmly backed Hemingway's writing when he was struggling to become an author and Mary arranged everything for him and handled the odd jobs. They brought warmth and comfort to Hemingway and made him realize women were not so evil as he once thought. But his other wife Martha, who was a charming blonde and also talented correspondent, was not willing to suspend her job and stay at home with Hemingway after they married. So, when he met Mary, he divorced Martha because of their different attitudes toward family. But he still thought she was a charming new woman after they parted.

Of course, Hemingway's life experience can only partly explain why he had such complex attitudes towards women.

Rise of Feminism and Decline of Patriarchal Power

The rise of feminism amidst the decline of patriarchal power is another important reason. Hemingway went to Paris with his wife Hadley in 1921. There in the early 1920s, postwar feminism was most prominent. The position of women was undergoing major changes. They asked for sexual freedom; they were not satisfied to stay at home but wanted to work outside; they did not want to stand behind men but beside men and have equal status with them. It is not an overstatement to say that these changes were in some sense a trauma for Hemingway and for others in his generation who were born in a patriarchal society where the social structure tended to favor men over women. After World War I, changes took place in many fields, and the war between men and women became more fierce. Hemingway recognized and also encouraged women's liberation, but was in fear of women's power over men. He favored feminism but also regretted the decline of patriarchal power. Hemingway was thought to be a representative of "the lost generation" after World War I who were hurt by the war either in body or in spirit. And after the war, they experienced these major changes in society. They did not know how to deal with the problem of feminism. They had many questions that they could not answer in their life. The gender problem was one of the bewilderments that they faced.

Hemingway tried to find a correct method to solve the problem. By portraying a series of strong men, he was trying to retrieve men's dignity. Confronted with loneliness, failure, or death, these strong men never gave up but kept their senses and manner properly. The lonely Jake helped and comforted Brett one time after another and never expressed his failure and loneliness before others; Frederic Henry left his lover who was pregnant when he received the order of returning to the front and had to live on after her death; the old man Santiago never stopped fighting against the adverse environment and the shark. It is not difficult to find out that his descriptions of these strong men in fact also expressed Hemingway's ambivalence: women were strong, but men were also strong and women's power cannot be over men's. From this point, readers can more easily understand why Hemingway made great efforts in portraying many men of iron.

Conclusions

From the depiction of the women in Hemingway's novels, his idea about relationship between men and women is deeply understood. When he depicted traditional women, he sympathized with them in their sufferings which proved he was not indifferent to women. When he depicted new women, he was ambivalent: he respected new women for their anti-traditional behaviors, but was afraid that their power would be stronger than men's. But he was not a misogynist. When he created the ideal women, he must believe; the complementary true love is a good way of avoiding unhappy marriage. So, to a great extent, though he sometimes disgusted, to be exact, was afraid of women especially new women, his idea of complementary marriage happened to hold the same view with feminism. From this, Ernest Hemingway did more or less predict the trend of the social gender roles reconstruction at that time. When rereading his novels from the aspect of his depictions of the women, readers can not only understand him and his works better and clear up some wrong assumptions, but also understand the idea of social gender advocated by the contemporaneous feminists more deeply.

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