
Hemingway's Gender And Sexuality

Ernest Hemingway, the epitome of machismo and misogyny for almost the whole 20th century, described himself as a boxer, hunter, fisher, and bullfighter. His contemporaries, though, most typically Zelda Fitzgerald, F. Scott Fitzgerald's wife, remarked, "No one can be that macho!" (Milford). In a way, Zelda was right; Hemingway's writing, aside from the obvious testosterone-ridden image he liked to paint, was also very emotional and filled with humor. However, for years the underlying progressiveness of Hemingway was ignored, together with his literature deemed ridden with toxic masculinity (Linde). Yet the women in his prose are often inspired by the women in Hemingway's life and are thus multi-layered and nuanced. As a result, making them even more complex than the male characters. In addition, his writing shows various progressive ideas regarding gender relations and sexuality. Genderfluidity and homosexuality, notably in stories such as *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Garden of Eden*, and *The Sea Change*, are prevalent themes in Hemingway's writing, even though, for his time, they were deemed perverse. Hemingway simply changed the perspective and framed the sexual content in his stories as sexually inventive. In this essay, I will analyze Hemingway's gender portrayals and how they undermine the typical relationship between man and woman, through the underlying theme of homosexuality.

First of all, what shaped Hemingway is his childhood, especially his relationship with his mother. As much as Hemingway portrays himself as a virile man and takes pride in his manliness, many authors argue this overt masculinity is a simple façade beneath which Hemingway conceals the childhood trauma his mother had inflicted upon him (Moddelmog). Grace Hall-Hemingway liked to dress her son during his infancy similarly to his one-year-older sister and consequently presenting them as twins. In fact, his mother was so into having twin daughters, that she even held Hemingway's older sister back a year in school, so both siblings could attend the same year. This peculiar parenting practice obviously left its mark on Hemingway, prompting him to develop a lifelong gender complexity. Hence his want to occasionally adopt a female persona in his heterosexual relationships and his hair fetish. In fact, with his wives, he often would reverse gender roles during sex. Correspondingly, some of Hemingway's stories have an important theme 'Gender', such as *The Garden of Eden* and *The Sun Also Rises*. Both stories contain characters that have a very fluid relationship with gender, similar to Hemingway's own stance on gender inside a relationship.

The Sun Also Rises' two main characters, Brett Ashley and Jake Barnes, both are a twist on the female-male stereotypes prevalent during Hemingway's life. Brett Ashley is described as a promiscuous woman, twice divorced and involved with Jake as well as three other men, amongst them her fiancé. Brett's character is a reflection of the New Woman in the '20s. The New Woman was a feminist ideal, that pushed for equality between genders in a previously male-dominated world. Hemingway grew up during this sexual revolution. However, whereas the new woman valued self-fulfillment rather than self-sacrifice, the idea of self-restrained moral masculinity was replaced by an aggressive, sexualized virility. As a result, these changed gender rules demanded new forms of courtship, namely dating. But it was not until Hemingway moved to Paris that he came into contact with real people in these new unconventional relationships. This might be the reason a large part of *The Sun Also Rises* plays out in Paris, where Brett's cropped hair and homosexual friends were not as frowned upon as in America.

Alternatively, Jake Barnes' character suffers from a war injury which makes him impotent. By taking away his manhood, consequently his ability to have sex with women, Hemingway dissipated Jake Barnes' masculine identity, putting him on the same level as the other homosexual characters in the book according to critics, although Barnes expresses frustrations towards these characters throughout the book, reflecting his own sexual and gender anxiety. Hemingway's writing also has been deemed homophobic, for it holds many gay slurs at the slightest affection between two men. This can be illustrated by the scene where one of Barnes' friends expresses his affection towards him, but then quickly says he could not have been able to tell him this in New York for fear of being called a 'faggot' (Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*). Furthermore, Jake and Brett's relationship holds many plays on the stereotypes of traditional heterosexual relationships. For instance, Brett's overt sexuality contrasting with Barnes' impotence, leads to the downfall of their relationship because they both believe they cannot consummate their love (Comley and Scholes). Yet, this statement is homosexuality erasure, because by Brett and Barnes' standard, and thus by Hemingway's as well, love between two partners cannot work if there is no traditional, heterosexual intercourse. However, homosexual couples do not have intercourse the way *The Sun Also Rises* expects couples to have, though that does not mean their love is less valid. Moreover, in *The Sun Also Rises* the emphasis lays on new gender roles and how they affect the relationship between man and woman.

Equally important in the study of gender fluidity and homosexuality in Hemingway's literature is *The Garden of Eden*. The story starts with a newly-wed couple, Catherine and David, at the beach. There, Catherine cut her hair short "cropped as short as a boy's" and convinces her husband to dye his as hers, in other words, their first step towards gender reversal. Hemingway does not explicitly describe the couple's sexual encounters but invites the reader to imagine the reversed heterosexual encounters with Catherine telling David in bed; "You're my girl, Catherine" (Hemingway, *The Garden of Eden*). Furthermore, at the hotel, the couple meets Marita and they both fall in love with her. Although Catherine and Marita's relationship is homosexual, Hemingway writes them from a very heterosexual view. By all means, their lesbian encounter ends in disaster; the next stage in Catherine's corruption. Yet, Marita's encounter with David is another step in her conversion to heterosexuality, reflecting the male fantasy of converting a lesbian to another way of sexuality. Finally, when Marita and David end up together, they both have broken loose from their orthodox, black-and-white, sexuality; orthodox lesbianism and orthodox heterosexuality respectively. Although Marita and David continue their sexual endeavors with their gender roles reversed, this all happens within a heterosexual relationship. In this case, homosexuality, between Marita and Catherine, is labeled corrupt and Marita and David's relationship, although genderfluid, is deemed sexually inventive. This way, Hemingway's literature fits inside the sexual revolution of the '20s, all the while staying out of perversion and vice.

Whereas *The Garden of Eden* and *The Sun Also Rises*' themes are more about genderfluidity than homosexuality, Hemingway's short story, *The Sea Change* has a heavy undertone of the latter. Besides the obvious plot of a woman leaving a man for another woman, there is another subplot in the story that handles the acceptance of one's queer sexuality, namely the husbands. Although this view on the young man's subplot is not viewed by every critic the same, there is compelling evidence to support this view. The first thing to remember, the description of the couple points out one important aspect of the young man's appearance, notably his features are a mirror image of the young woman's: both have cropped and sun-bleached hair, and tan skin. This aspect comes into play at the end of the story when the young

man looks into the mirror and remarks that he has changed. Many scholars and critics speculate that it is his wife's adultery with another woman that enables the young man to accept his own sexuality, and this is made clear by him looking into the mirror, noticing he's a changed man, and accepting it. The story ends with the young man seated at the bar, next to two other men, who could be seen as a symbol for homosexuality (Nolan Jr), his wife has run off to her lover, and the bartender compliments his appearance (Hemingway, *The Sea Change*). All of these plot points are underlining the already present theme of homosexuality, but instead of the gay storyline being that of the wife, it is that of the husband. Most compelling evidence lies in a later manuscript version: the story ends with the husband looking into the mirror and asking the bartender, "what do punks drink, James. What can you recommend to a recent convert? ... Take a look at me and mix whatever you like." Similar to the published version, this version ends with the bartender complimenting the young man's appearance as well. Hemingway often uses the word 'punk' in his writing to designate male homosexuals. This version of the story suggests that the wife's change of sexuality has altered the young man's as well (Comley and Scholes). At the same time, this explicit remark could also be read ironically, in other words, the young man prefers to distance his fear that he might be gay as well by stating it as he stares at himself in the mirror (Fleming). Finally, *The Sea Change* holds its name from Ariel's speech in *The Tempest*. In this speech he tells about what happens to the bodies of drowned men; every anatomy feature alters into "something rich and strange". This change obviously points back to the young man's change after his wife's adultery, and how he looks freer and 'rich at the end, as can be deduced by the bartender's compliment. All in all, homosexuality has been described as a vice in previous stories, the focus more on genderfluidity, albeit in *The Sea Change*, homosexuality is much less perverse, and described as a natural course of things.

In conclusion, although Hemingway was labeled homophobic and misogynistic during a large part of the 20th century, new analyses of his work with knowledge of his childhood show that it might not be as black-and-white as people thought. Throughout his work, the struggle he has with accepting his sexuality and gender, prompted by his childhood trauma, surfaces: such as Jake's impotence leveling him with homosexuals, David taking pleasure in playing the woman role during sex with his wife and Marita, and the young man's changed sexuality after his wife's same-sex adultery. As a result, this enables the women of Hemingway's stories to take on a bigger, more complex role, contrary to what women were used to in the 1920s' male-dominated literature. Instead, Hemingway wrote women who knew what they wanted and were confident in their sexuality. In other words, there was almost no damsels-in-distress in his stories. The women he wrote are not far from the women in his life. Indeed, like his characters, Hemingway liked adopting a female persona during intercourse. In other words, Hemingway's personal views bled into his literature, hence his characters having a complex relationship with the gender concept. Although there are many homosexual aspects in his writing, genderfluidity takes on a much more central role. That is to say, although there are obvious homosexual characters in his stories, most of the homosexuality in Hemingway's writing is speculation derived from ambiguous remarks and actions his characters say and do, however, his characters have oftentimes demasculinized characteristics. Therefore, Hemingway's vision on gender is not binary, but a spectrum upon which his characters flow. All in all, it is clear that Hemingway sets himself apart from the traditional writers in the 20th century by the way he plays with gender stereotypes in his literature, portraying the difficulties facing societal gender binaries. He does not use explicit language to indicate his belief in various genders, however, his characters oftentimes exhibit behavior outside of their gender boundaries. Hence, though the question, if Hemingway were queer, cannot be answered with full certainty, what can be concluded from the paragraphs above is that his characters, similarly to Hemingway himself,

show androgynous behavior, creating a new balance between man and woman inside a heterosexual relationship.