

## **Ernest Hemingway's Portrayal of Female Characters**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to divulge Ernest Hemingway's literary skill to portray the female characters. He occupies a prominent place in modern literary history of America, who has presented the simple but unconventional style, with the problems of war, violence, death and he has been immortalized by the individuality of his style. In his novels, women characters have overcome their struggles and made a shift from pessimistic to optimistic philosophy.

**Keywords:** Ernest Hemingway, Female Characters, Irony, disillusionment, social predilection, Humiliation, self-effacing.

Of all the modern American writers, Ernest Hemingway is considered the most anti-intellectual partly because of his style and partly because of his apocalyptic vision. He has been singled out either for glorification or for condemnation as an anti-intellectual writer, for in his fiction, thought and imagination are deprecated and the life of sensations get glorified. Hemingway is said to have acquired fame for what come to be known as 'the irony of the unsaid'. He was the master of the idiom of understatement, i.e. he would leave much half-said and more unsaid. He was seriously concerned with the problems of his craft. He was a highly conscious craftsman and a dedicated artist. He learned his craft from European prose-masters like Maupassant, Dumas, Daudet, Flaubert, Stendhal, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Balzac, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Conrad and James Joyce.

Ernest Hemingway has been acclaimed as a creator of fresh and simple style for his age, at once concrete, colloquial, objective and tightly ironic. In the words of Archibald MacLeish, Hemingway has "whittled a style for his time from a walnutstick". His style is the expression of his war – scarred personality. It was forged and evolved during the same period when Hemingway was making an effort to re-organize his personality after his disillusionment in the First World War. J.B. Priestly aptly remarks that the style of Hemingway "for which he deserves the highest praise, not only made him as a writer, but probably saved him as a man from the results of some trauma, some open war wound in his inner life. His matter and manner haunted him right from the very beginning to the end of his literary career.

Such a great literary genius was born in Oak Park, Illinois, just outside Chicago, on July 21, 1898 and died by committing suicide in Ketchum, Idaho in 1961. His father was a well-known physician and passionate amateur sportsman. His mother had talent both in music and painting. During his early childhood, there seems to have existed a tussle between his parents about the future of the boy who was the second of the six children in the family. The mother wanted to develop his talent for music, whereas to father encouraged him to develop outdoor interests. Apparently, his father carried his wishes and gave him his first fishing rod when he was only three years old and he first shot gun when he was hardly seven. Hemingway took active part in school activities. He had been a member of the debating club, the oratorical club and the Boy's High school club which presented talks on Christianity and the good boy's life. In 1917, he graduated from Oak Park High School

Hemingway began his literary career as a poet and his first work entitled *The Stories and Ten Poems* was well-received. However, experience taught him that poetry was not his domain and he was really cut out to be a writer of fiction. With the publication of *The Torrents of Spring*, he felt that he had come of age. He gave up imitating the style of Sherwood Anderson who had been his ideal and guide and his early stories and struck out an independent line of his own. The important works of his that deserve our attention are 1.*In our Times*, 2.*The Torrents of Spring*, 3.*The Sun Also Rises*, 4.*A Farewell to Arms*, 5.*Death in the Afternoon*, 6.*Green Hills of Africa*, 7.*To have and Have Not*, 8.*The Fifth Column*, 9.*For whom the Bell Tolls*, 10.*Men at War : An Anthology*, 11.*Across the River and into the Trees*, 12. *The old Man and the Sear*, 13.*A Memorable Feast* and 14. *Islands in the Stream*.

No doubt, the genius of Hemingway was moulded by cultural and literary influences. The impact of culture affects all the writers of a certain period but of them do not interpret that influence in their creative writings in the same manner. The literary influences on Hemingway were the result of his perusal of and borrowings from the writings of his predecessors. Since Hemingway was born in America, it was natural that he should feel the impact and impress of the political, cultural and social predilections of that country. The pursuit of happiness which was interpreted by a disillusioned generation as pursuit of pleasure entered into Hemingway's mental wake-up and gets mirrored in his writings throughout. The influence of his family atmosphere left a deep mark on his writings. His matter was of a domineering type who reduced his father to the condition of a henpecked husband. Hemingway's books show that his father never tried to assert his authority as head of the family with any measure of success. Hence, Hemingway's portrayal of woman is either a wish-fulfillment or an open condemnation of virago type of woman in the American scene. The wish-fulfillment he found not in America but in other continues. His esteem of American woman had been so greatly reduced in his mind that he could not think of a single American woman of lovable quality to figure in his works. The role that an American woman plays is to unman man and thus to humiliate him to such an extent as to make him feel horrified to lead a family life in such uncongenial situation or to force him to snap the bond of matrimonial union and to lead a solitary life all by himself. There are instances where the husband has become impervious to the pleadings of his wife, as in the story *Cat in the Rain*, or where the wife has resigned herself to her lot and become passively resistant to the husband's expectation of her as in *Out of Season*.

On close examination, the female characters in Hemingway's works seem to be heterogeneous and not homogenous as many critics think. They may not simply fit into the clear cut and broad divisions the bitch or the virgin, the black or white. Each woman in the story or the novel seems to fulfill a definite purpose depending on the author's ideology which appears to have undergone a clear shift from the pessimistic stoicism of the nineteen twenties and early thirties to the optimistic philosophy of the late thirties and afterwards. These women reflect Hemingway's ideological differences and hence some are quite unlike the others while a few of them seem to have certain identical similarities. They cannot be grouped into the rigid bitch or virgin categories. They may be rather categorized into five amorphous groups which help us to know of Hemingway's attitude to love, sex and woman in general.

The clear-cut category of Hemingway women should be the mindless Indian girls like Nick's Prudence Mitchell. They are the "love objects" who demand nothing from the man. We come across two such girls, the sweet title Indian with "plump brown legs" and "well holding arms" mentioned in "Fathers and Sons" and "Ten Indians" and the Moorish tart of *The Fifth Column*. The naked Squaw stirring the primordial feeling in Scripps O'Neil and Yogi Johnson described in *The Torrents of Spring* also belongs to this category. These women do not demand anything from the man and give nothing but their bodies. These Indian girls can be very good companions to young boys who may not think of marriage for many years. A man who is very busy with responsible work all the time like Philip Rawlings in *The Fifth Column* may find ideal companions in these Indian females. They can offer only sex without love and hence seem fit for the young man's groping experience with sex. These girls constitute only a minor portion in the world of Hemingway women.

The second category seems to be the largest and consists of the naïve, loving and trusting girls. They are easily identified by their long hair and sweetly feminine qualities. They can be termed as womanly women. These ladies are self-effacing. Many of them are the more appendages of the man they love and totally submerge their identity in him. They seek love or feel on impulsion towards it but find nothing but frustration. Their men either ignore them or they die. The following characters fit into the group: Liz Coates ("Up in Michigan") Catherine Barkley (A Farewell to Arms), Marjorie (End of Something) Maria (For Whom the Bell Tolls) and Renata (Across the River and into the Trees).

The third category consists of the heroines who seem to have a stultifying effect on the man. They are pardonable since they do not knowingly or actively corrupt the man. Such women would include the wife in "out of season" who is unwilling to listen to the man's apologies, the unseen wife in "Cross Country Snow", who spoils her husband's idyll in the mountain with her unwanted pregnancy, Harry's wife in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" who smothers his literary talents by her wealth and comforts and Dorothy Bridges of *The Fifth Column* who exerts a corrupting influence by desiring to make him happy. These women are to be pitied since they either lose the love that temporarily sustains them or never find love at all. But their men can find satisfaction outside of love; Nick in outdoor activities like skiing and fishing, Harry in duck – shooting and writing and Philip Rawlings in the communist crusade. These ladies are negative but also relatively virgin unlike the Hemingway bitches.

The fourth category consists of the Hemingway women who are bitches. Since are bitches by circumstances and some are deliberate bitches. Brett and Macomber cannot be freed from the blame with which we associate them, through their unfortunate circumstances made them what they are. In spite of the author's explanation, they fail to pleasure us. Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises* and Margot Macomber in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" belong to this group Brett has had a very unpleasant past. After two unsuccessful marriages, she is arranging for a divorce and to get her pang, she drowns herself in sex and drink. When Romero asks her to become more feminine, she is unable to please him. She is incapable of changing back to a more affirmative woman. Any how she is not a thorough bitch like Margot Macomber who is closer to the line of extreme bitchery. More malicious than Brett or Macomber are Georgette in *The Sun Also Rises* and Helone Bradley in *To Have and have Not* and Dr. Adam's wife in "The Doctor and the Doctor's wife". They are treated entirely unsympathetically by Hemingway. These ladies totally corrupt the men with whom they associate. The Hemingway women of the fifth and the last group represent the essential goodness and naturalness of the earth. Pilar in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Marie Morgon in *To Have and Have Not* are natural and good, though they are totally a moral.

Hemingway, as Tom Burnham put it, has tried "to create feminine character in Pilar by endowing her with certain masculine qualities like courage, loyalty, self-sufficiency, aggressiveness and hostility" (P22). This is true of Marie Morgan also. These sympathetic and good females have masculine virtues. Hemingway's world is essentially the male world. William Philips remarks:

"Though women are tangled in it,  
Hemingway's world is essentially a  
man's world just as much so as  
an army or a Turkish bath, in which,  
however, each man feels cut off  
from his fellow-men" (P 94).

Hemingway treats the women only as foils for his heroes. The women have only secondary roles to play. They provide temporary companionships and fore-doomed love to the Henrys, the Jordons and the Cantwells and do not enter into the masculine world of fishing, hunting, bullfighting and soldiering. Their pattern of life seems to be one of loving, drinking and mating. They don't think but merely act. They are treated only objectively and hence lack intensity and depth. Hemingway's attitude towards sex seems to be quite conservative. He hailed from Oak Park, Illinois which was "... more than respectable and prosperous. It was also protestant and middle class. It exulted in all these characteristics" (P 2).

Hemingway's attitude towards women is conventional. He seems to have the opinion that women's submission is the basis of love. He prefers man to overpower the women and not vice-versa. He finds that the happy love affair issues out of male dominance. A woman's principal function in life seems to be to surrender her physical and intellectual freedom to her man. The function of woman only

to love the man is rather a narrow view and that is why Hemingway's heroines seems to be mere caricatures, objects of love rather than characters as pointed out by critics. James Colvert has commented thus:

“... the heroines rely upon their masculine counterparts for the actual conclusions drawn from male experience and thus become deferential and eager students of the hero belongs” (P 384).

To conclude, it may be said that Hemingway's is essentially a male world where the highest state offered to a woman is to become one with the man.

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