

# Ernest Hemingway as a Feminist Writer: a New Interpretation of the Author and his Works

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## Abstract

Ernest Hemingway was a very popular writer in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. Then in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Feminist women (and later pro-Feminist men) derided his work as sexist. They took a masculine icon and attempted to argue that he himself and all of his work was inherently misogynistic. This was largely motivated by a larger social movement against patriarchal oppression of women and is a view that has been passed down to modern writers.

In the course of this work I will argue that he and his work were not misogynistic. I will argue that his work had many strong female characters and that those interpretations of those characters as “bitch women” were largely the opinions of literary critics of his time and not Hemingway himself. I will further argue that being a very masculine man, who often writes about traditionally male activities such as fishing, does not automatically mean you hate women (and being a very feminine woman does not automatically mean you hate men). I will then go on to reinterpret a sampling of Hemingway's stories with a new Feminist reading.

I will begin by exploring others' critical examinations of his works and him as a person. This will draw on Hemingway's works, critical reviews of Hemingway's work, and biographical sources on Hemingway. For the sake of brevity I will focus almost exclusively on a sample from *The First Forty-Nine Stories*, a collection which offers a good range of his work over many years.

## Preface

The critiques of the stories that are contained in chapters one through three were first written after reading the stories for the first time. Except for the few of them I'd reviewed through the course of my degree program I had not read them previously or read or heard any critical analyses of them. Additionally, I had only read very limited biographical information on Hemingway beforehand so as not to taint my readings with any prejudice. I later read criticisms of his work, and him, and a great deal more biographical information.

I began this way in order to foster new and original thinking on these stories, and to ensure that my readings would not be tainted. If some of my own, original thoughts on them happen to be consistent with someone else's previous views, and are not *sui generis*, it was unintentional, but would strongly support it as being an accurate analysis.

I had set out with the idea of exploring Hemingway's work as being Feministic, or at least not misogynistic, but if indeed I had found misogyny I would have written that my intention was to reinterpret his work but that I could not. I genuinely did not find misogyny in his work, or him as a person. If I had I would honestly report about that.

After the introduction I keep my critical focus on *The First Forty-Nine Stories* because of the vast range they offer; stories from women's perspectives, men's perspectives, stories without women, stories about family, about fishing, about war (some of which were almost lifted from some of his work as a wartime journalist), and much more. This more than any other single work by Hemingway demonstrates his range as a writer and thus expresses the biggest multitude of experiences and attitudes. For the sake of brevity I edited this review down to only a few stories per type of story (stories with men and women, stories from women's perspectives, and stories without women), but those stories act as examples of a larger message about reinterpreting his works.

## Introduction – The Argument for Reconsidering Hemingway and his Work: a Response to Popular Feminist Criticism

Hemingway was a very successful writer in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. Then, in the 1970's, as what came to be known as Second Wave feminism began, many critics, particularly women, began to criticize his works and him as a person.

In some ways it is understandable that feminists, especially women, chose to criticize Hemingway and his work. When faced with centuries of oppression at the behest of male chauvinists who always privileged male perspectives and experiences it is not surprising that many women would seek to tear down a popular masculine icon. In some ways this could mean that Hemingway and his writings were essentially the victims of a much larger social issue.

The Second Wave Feminism of the 1970's could seem vitriolic towards certain men and patriarchal institutions. However, we must remember that this was a response to vitriol against women.

Their Feminist forebears, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolfe, were contemporaries of Hemingway. In fact, Hemingway's women who hunt and fish can remind us of de Beauvoir's assertion that sex and gender are distinctly different and that, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman. One's society decides what is female or male." (*A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, 86.)

Through the 1970's the focus in Feminism increasingly moved to literary representation "of women, by and for women" (*A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, 121.) There were extremely few women authors writing about women, or anything, before then. This makes it all the more unusual and important that Hemingway wrote about women, and that these women were often strong, independent, and skilled. Interestingly, these notions of gender and sex differences were actually part of Hemingway's childhood, but many Feminists saw only Hemingway's popular image as a bravado male, and they typically found it offensive. He is often seen as an example of the ultimate macho man who was if anything happy about war, killing (fishing and hunting), and privileging all things masculine. Some critics say that his macho persona was a harsh response to the fact that in early childhood his mother sometimes dressed him as a girl and called him Ernestine. "This fact started to make Ernest feel a kind of hatred toward women" (Assemi, Asayesh, Jabrilli, Sheikhzade, and Hajmohammadian.) Statements like this, however, involve acting as if we can get into another person's head. We cannot. We cannot know what someone else was thinking or feeling throughout their life, we can only make educated guesses. Thus we should not attempt to act or speak as if we can get into someone else's head. And it is possible that his early experiences of gender play and costuming taught him the idea of gender as theatre. Gender (not biological sex) is social costuming (Zevallos). Many critics of Hemingway have discussed his many short stories and books as a theatrical display of masculine behavior and codes of conduct (Strychacz, *Hemingway's Theaters of Masculinity*).

Thus his public image as the ultimate macho male, who publicly stated that he was especially proud to have *sons*, may have been his own conscious creation. In private

Hemingway said he always wished he had a daughter (Moreira, *Hemingway on the China Front*.) That persona served him well in his career in his era. It was popular with both men and women in his time and freed him up to write about anything he wanted. For example, homosexuals in *Fiesta (the Sun also Rises)* and some of his short stories such as “The Sea Change”. He wrote about strong women, such as Pilar in *For whom the Bell Tolls*. He wrote what he liked without anyone ever questioning his masculinity or his sexuality. If his public image was wholly intentional then it was an excellent strategic move for someone who wanted a very strong and lasting career in the public eye in that era. More recent accounts of Hemingway and his life paint a very different picture of Hemingway than the one-dimensional, insensitive, bravado caricature he was and is usually perceived as (as portrayed as recently as 2012 in the largely historically inaccurate HBO film *Hemingway and Gellhorn*.)

The book *Hemingway in Love*, written by his close friend A.E. Hotchner, and published in 2015, explores a more sensitive side to his character.

For example, when Hemingway is talking about his very painful separation from his first wife Hadley, and his son Jack, affectionately nicknamed Bumby, it says Ernest said: I borrowed a handcart from the sawmill people and made several trips to Hadley’s place [to give her her things]... Putting those intimate things in the cart and pushing them down the street got to me. I started to cry and cried all the way there. Crying is a very rare emotion for me. When I got to her apartment, Hadley wasn’t there, Marie Cocotte was minding Bumby, who ran to me happily. When he saw my tears, he asked how I had hurt myself. I showed him a little cut I had on the back of my right hand. He became very concerned and ran to get a bandage that he lovingly placed over the cut making me cry all the more... After I emptied the last cart, I picked up Bumby to tell him good-bye. He patted my bandage tenderly. ‘Je t’aime, Papa,’ he said [I love you father]. French was the only language he spoke. ‘La vie est beau avec Papa. [Life is beautiful with dad.]’ ” (Hotchner, 72.)

This shows another dimension to Hemingway’s character, one which he chose to keep out of the public eye during his lifetime.

And in the preface the author states:

Over the ensuing years, I would observe Ernest’s gentle patience with young people like myself innumerable times... In my case, for example, I had no military training in firearms, I was a flop at wing shooting, but Ernest patiently led me to proficiency in jump-shooting mallards... The more our friendship grew, the more I realized that the stories that had circulated about his gruff, pugnacious personality were a myth invented by people who didn’t know him but judged him by the subjects he wrote about. He would stand up to any transgressor, yes, but I never saw him as an aggressor. (Hotchner, xiv.)

Additionally, some have said that he and his fourth wife Mary Welsh experimented with gender role reversals in bed. In Linda Wagner-Martin’s book *Ernest Hemingway: a Literary Life*, published in 2007, the author notes that Welsh grew up homesteaded in the very small and rural Minnesotan town of Bemidji, near Ojibwe American Indians (like Hemingway), and that she was essentially her father’s son. (Wager-Martin, 150.) Mary was a journalist, like his second and fourth wives Pauline Pfeifer and Martha Gellhorn, which could suggest that Hemingway was seeking an equal. Mary’s childhood as a tomboy shows a gender role reversal, especially when counter-posed with Hemingway’s childhood experiences of being dressed as a girl. In fact,

many critics strongly suggest they did gender role reversal in sex play and Mary herself said they were “androgynous in bed” (Latham.)

Wagner-Martin, a well-known critic on Hemingway, seems to both appreciate and dislike Hemingway and is very sympathetic towards Welsh and Gellhorn. In her book she sometimes includes a Feminist interpretation of things. This means that she and Hotchner are a good juxtaposition for researching Hemingway as each has a clear and opposite bias; for and against him.

Her book offers some valuable insights into Hemingway’s life, in spite of its biases against him. The biggest problem with this biography is the writer’s dubious and egoistical tendency to write as if she can be in Hemingway’s head. For example, when she writes, “In his mind, the only reason [Pauline] would leave Arkansas would be to join him” (Wagner-Martin, 66.) If the book had begun with a preface stating that the author thought writing with this kind of authority was, in her opinion, good for the flow and continuity of a book but that she recognized no one can ever really be in someone else’s head this would be fine. But since she didn’t write any such disclaimer it’s ludicrous; she comes across as wholly irritated with Hemingway for an imagined thought which he may or may not have ever actually thought. I bring this up not to criticize this very talented writer but to draw attention to a common problem that arises when we try to analyze any person or work. We must be careful of how much we assume to know about someone or their work. This is very important to consider when we discuss popular criticism of Hemingway and his work; most popular opinions of him today are based on analyzations of him and his work done by people that never knew him and made their careers out of espousing feminist views that were directed at breaking down the privileging of male and masculine people and behaviors. It is easy for humans to be biased and to project biases and preconceived notions into the things they study and difficult for us to remove personal biases from our thoughts and actions. For example, the author claims Hemingway’s short story “Now I lay me” expressed animosity towards women (Wagner-Martin, 75.) That is one interpretation. However, another way of interpreting the story is that it does not express animosity towards women but indifference. As the narrator claims the memory of all women runs together it reminds me of what many older women say about men: that men are all the same. In my experience, as people get older they often state that all of the opposite sex are the same. This is of course not factually true, but if written into a story it isn’t necessarily meant to be. And it is important to note here that if a woman said something to this affect about men probably no one would get offended but the double-standard is that men supposedly *cannot* make statements to this affect without it being some kind of attack on women.

As this demonstrates, there are many different ways of interpreting things. For example, Hemingway is often seen as sexist (in Wagner-Martin’s book and in other biographical sources) because he went on a safari that was men-only, thus excluding then-wife Pauline. However, he went on his first safari with her (paid for by her very rich uncle), and he went on later safaris with Mary. According to Hotcher’s book, which was made from conversations he had with Hemingway, he chose to have one men-only safari in order to get a break from his unhappy marriage to Pauline. Additionally, throughout history, throughout all cultures, it is considered normal for men and women to periodically do things with members of the same sex only and get a break from the other sex (Dr. Leonard Sax, *Why Gender Matters*.) This doesn’t mean

everyone secretly hates all members of the other sex. A man can want to bond with other men without hating women and vice-versa. And we must consider that when women write about experiences that only females can have, such as pregnancy and childbirth, they are not then accused of hating men.

Some critics have said Hemingway was a misogynist because of how Catherine dies in *A Farewell to Arms*. It is interesting to note that Wagner-Martin states that Hemingway said he did not know how *A Farewell to Arms* would end and contemplated Catherine and her baby both living, one or the other living, or both dying. And that there's a good chance the news of his father's death was what really affected his opinion to have them both die (Wagner-Martin, 81.) Another way of interpreting this event in the story is that it privileges women's unique issues; in a war drama he demonstrated that pregnancies and childbirth can be as deadly as battlefields. In my view her death shows respect for women's struggles and gives them equal status to men's struggles (as only men went into battle in his time.)

Interestingly, the character's having a pregnancy out of wedlock was so scandalous that the final installment in *Scribner's* was banned in New York (which ironically created greater publicity and book sales (Wagner-Martin, 86.)) This important point was changed for the film version where they have a secret marriage. This could be interpreted as Hemingway being feministic in telling the truths of women's lives. He also did this at the start of the novel by showing the uniquely harsh stigma attached to women who have premarital sex as one nurse is being dismissed in disgrace and almost no one will even speak to her. And he showed respect and appreciation for women in their wartime job in that era, that of being a nurse; watching men die, helping doctors amputating men's limbs, and nursing patients back to health. This is very important given that not censoring the many facts of women's lives—often their sex lives or health issues related to female anatomy—has long been a crucial part of the Feminist movement.

Speaking the truths of women's lives is an act of feminism and it's something Hemingway wasn't afraid to do. For example, in "Hills like White Elephants" he talks around abortion. In "Che Ti Dice La Patria" and "The Light of the World" he speaks frankly and in a nonjudgmental manner about prostitutes. In the latter the two protagonists have a friendly and mostly non-sexual conversation with the women prostitutes at the train station. In *For whom the Bell Tolls* he talks about (or around) rape and privileges this female trauma as equal to men's traumas in war time. Additionally, rape is mentioned in "A Way You'll Never Be" when Nick Adams is viewing all the papers strewn on a battlefield with the dead bodies. He notes that the propaganda pictures portraying the enemy as rapists are unrealistic. They are designed to look sexually tantalizing when in reality, as the story makes clear, rape is actually brutal, dehumanizing, and life-threatening. The issue of rape in wartime is one that many novels, films, and TV shows today don't even address.

Hemingway's willingness to discuss women's unique struggles and traumas was an act of feminism, whether intentional or not. Being honest about the simple truths of women's bodies, women's traumas, and women's lives is an issue that has long been at the forefront of feminism and is still at the forefront of it today. It used to be considered quite scandalous when Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Susan B. Anthony's writing partner) would hang a kind of flag outside her small town home to announce the births of her children; in her time a birth was considered a private

moment that should not be spoken of in public, as with all aspects of women's private lives and anatomy (Burns and Barnes.) In the past decade prominent U.S. Feminist activist and writer Jennifer Baumgardner has struggled immensely to get women—and sometimes their male partners—to speak up about having the common procedure of an abortion. She began an “I had an abortion” campaign to get women to speak up about it, and wear T-shirts with that line on them intentionally like a Scarlet Letter. Whether women keep or terminate their unwanted pregnancies was and is considered a taboo subject, while the truths of men's lives are not considered taboo. (Baumgardner.) This demonstrates that Hemingway and his work were sometimes ahead of their time when it came to women.

As we have seen, there are different ways of interpreting the same things or people. Inevitably, all of us have a tendency to project preconceived notions into what we come in contact with unless we work very diligently to become more self-aware. Additionally, we have a strong tendency to be influenced by our teachers thus it can be difficult to avoid simply regurgitating their opinions.

Lastly, before attempting to interpret someone or their work, we must put them in the proper context; their time period and the ideas and social values people were raised with in that time. Hemingway was writing in a pre-Second Wave Feminism era. In *Ernest Hemingway: a Literary Life*, we get a glimpse into what another literary man of Hemingway's time and talent thought about his book *A Farewell to Arms* and its treatment of women:

[Scott] Fitzgerald read the manuscript and conscientiously gave Ernest... a full critique. He found Catherine's dialogue and demeanor unbelievable (and long; if Hemingway were to cut anything, he said, he should cut her speeches and not Frederic's). He then advised Ernest to listen to women as he had done in “Hills like White Elephants” and “Cat in the Rain.” He thought the novel should stay with the war, instead of drifting off into what he called the old story of the unmarried and pregnant woman.

Hemingway appears comparatively caring of and insightful into women's lives and the problems they face when put in the proper context.

Given all of that, I think it is fair to say that Hemingway and his work deserve to be reconsidered.

Over the next three chapters I will demonstrate that it is possible to do a feminist reading of Hemingway's work. His canon is large and includes a great deal of work as a journalist and other nonfiction, novels, short stories, and poetry. For the sake of brevity, and to cover a wide range of subjects and a lengthy period of time, I will limit my focus to *The First Forty-Nine Stories*. I will focus first on stories with men and women characters, stories from women's perspectives, and stories with men only, using pieces from each of the books that were compiled into this book, and some of the new stories that appeared for the first time in this book. For these three chapters any material in quotations is from Hemingway's *The First Forty-Nine Stories*. For the sake of brevity I will only insert page numbers in my in-text citations for these chapters when quoting material.

## Chapter 1 – Rereading Hemingway: a New Feminist Critique of a Sample from *The First Forty-Nine Stories*, Stories with Men and Women

From *In Our Time* (1925)—

“Indian Camp”:

This story works through Hemingway’s observations on how “white men” have treated women, American Indians, and nature. To clarify, “White men” means a certain type of Caucasian males but not all Caucasian males. For example, the Irish are excluded from this term because their land was colonized by the British. Their land, culture, and language mostly taken from them, just like American Indians. Essentially, the term is meant both literally and not literally and requires a broad historical knowledge of the colonial era to really understand.

She is screaming from labor pains so the men of her own tribe have moved far enough away so they don’t have to hear her. The boy Nick, perhaps representative of a younger (newer) generation, says, “Oh, Daddy, cannot you give her something to make her stop screaming?” in a manner that suggests he’s concerned about how much pain she’s in. The doctor responds with, “No. I haven’t any anesthetic,” which is very odd for a doctor and one that knew what he was going to the camp for. He then says, “But her screams are not important. I don’t hear them because they are not important.” He doesn’t say something like, I cannot focus on the noise because I have to work, he says, “they are not important”. (84) It seems odd for a doctor to not care that someone is in pain. This could mean the doctor represents “white man” in a broader sense. Also, the woman’s husband lies on the top bunk and turns away from all of them, away from his pained wife who will die if she doesn’t get care, and the men who are there to save her life and that of their baby. She—women and American Indians—have no voice as they are not being heard, and everyone has turned away from them.

It’s important to note also that in the course of the story she never actually consents to medical treatment, nor does her husband, or even the woman who helps boil the water. Perhaps we can assume that in such rural areas everyone knows everyone so she would recognize the doctor when she sees him but perhaps not. No one ever tells her that the men there are a doctor and his son and friends. They just walk in and start handling her, holding her down, and then the doctor cuts her open and stitches her side without asking or warning her of what they’re about to do. Although their actions are necessary to save her life they are done nearly as violently as possible and without any consideration for the woman herself. Her body is somewhat violated by this experience.

While the doctor and his party find a way to solve her breach birth no women from her tribe stand by her, hold her hand, or do anything to comfort her. One helps boil some water in a different room. That is all the aid she gets from other women, and it is only after the doctor tells

her to do so. This is especially strange given that in traditional cultures it's normal for the eldest women of the tribe to assist all new mothers in their birthing experiences. The story says that some tribeswomen were there earlier but left, the women themselves abandoning her. This shows how "white men" have displaced the normal order of the tribal society, and are also violating what is naturally a strictly matriarchal domain.

When the pregnant woman bites a man holding her down he says, "Damn squaw bitch" (85) which is both very racist and very sexist, especially back then when the word bitch was greatly more offensive than it is today. Women do not help or protect her from these harsh and extremely painful experiences.

That the birth is unnatural is an issue as well. The woman, being a product of this environment that's been damaged by the "white man" cannot have a natural birth. The fact that there are no other women around her shows a strong cutoff from the old, traditional, and natural social customs of the tribe, and demonstrates a lack of female empowerment or a female support network.

The white men in the story are more interested in the novelty of the doctor's improvisation of using a jackknife and fishing line to perform a cesarean delivery than with the woman's health or that of her baby's. And again, it's very telling that the doctor did not have a scalpel or sutures in his medical bag, as would be normal, especially given that he knew what he was going to the Indian camp to do. This shows ineptness in the white men and a total lack of consideration for planning or the damage they're doing.

The husband cutting his throat from ear to ear rather than helping his wife and meeting his new child shows the emasculation, voicelessness, and powerlessness of American Indian men in the face of the machinations of the white men who've come in.

The story shows the white father's failure as well when the doctor fails to protect Nick from seeing the man who's killed himself. And again when Nick asks, "Is dying hard, Daddy?" and he responds with, "No, I think it's pretty easy." (87). He fails to offer any comfort or reassurance to a young son who may well have just been traumatized by what he's seen.

The story does offer some hope in the end though as Nick trails his hand in the water. In Ojibwe culture the Earth is the mother, rivers her veins, and water her blood and nourishment (Callahan.) In the story the water feels warm to him in the cold morning although it should be cold in the morning. This could mean that he is reborn as less a boy than a man now and one that sides with the mother or Mother Earth figure in the story; a new man for a new era who will not be so cold and incidentally cruel as his father, his father's friends, and that previous generation of white men. He does not side with his father who has just failed him.

This story could be read as misogynistic if you weren't paying attention; Nick, the protagonist, is juxtaposing the cold nature of the men. The story is not cold towards the suffering of women, the characters are. The story itself is very sympathetic to women, and American Indians. And like *A Farewell to Arms* it shows Hemingway taking the dangers of pregnancies—a serious women's issue—very seriously.

"The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife":

This story explores the failings of men; the loggers make errors which cause there to be lost logs, the doctor is technically in the habit of stealing such logs, and the American Indians are incidentally participating in the “white man’s” destruction of the natural world and their own sacred lands. The doctor attempts to pretend he has different morals than he actually does; when called out about the logs technically belonging to someone else he hypocritically pretends he didn’t know that all along. But Dick Boulton only calls him out on it to get out of having to do a day’s work for the man as payment for helping him with his wife’s pneumonia a while back. This shows bad cunning, ungratefulness, and suggests he doesn’t value his wife’s health or her life very much if he’d risk not getting a favor from the doctor in the future in case his wife needs it again.

The doctor’s wife in the story is unsupportive. Instead of supporting or empathizing with her husband, as would be her job as a homemaker in that time period and as a traditional Christian woman, she says, “I hope you didn’t lose your temper” and then, “he who ruleth his spirit is greater than he that taketh a city” (93). She’s more concerned with how he appears publicly and with forcefully proselytizing than with being there for her husband. She goes on to disregard what he’s saying. The suggestion is that he’s completely wrong. Additionally, she is in her bedroom with the blinds drawn, sitting in darkness; she is inaccessible and does not let anything like new information in. She is generally judgmental and not supportive. A supportive wife would take his side then commend him for not losing his temper. She does no such thing. She has an opportunity to be a good wife and instead uses it as an opportunity to insult and even belittle her husband.

The husband leaves, telling his son that his mother wants to see him. His son insists on going with his father, who eventually acquiesces.

The story speaks of the shortcomings and failings of men, then shows shortcomings and failings in the one female character. This story makes neither men nor women look good. The story doesn’t seem to be making a comment on gender and which is better or worse. It’s much more about the characters and their interplay. As for the son, Nick, going off with his father we can see in the story that he’s choosing between two less than ideal options; neither parent, neither gender, is presented as ideal. One seems like they’ll be more permissive and less religiously zealous and therefore a more appealing option for a child.

As the story ends Nick says he knows where there are black squirrels and the father says, “All right, let’s go there.” (95) It ends with Nick, the younger generation, who sees and understands both parents’ shortcomings, taking some control and leading the way.

#### “Soldier’s Home”:

This story is about the disillusionment of the soldier’s experience. This is seen from the second paragraph when it says, “There is a picture which shows him on the Rhine with two German girls and another corporal. Krebs and the corporal look too big for their uniforms. The German girls are not beautiful. The Rhine does not show in the picture.” (137.) The first line sets a standard of expectations. The next three each show disappointment.

In the story both of his parents let Krebs down. Neither father nor mother does a good job of parenting Krebs, neither is there for him, neither makes his adjustment back to civilian life

better or easier for him. Only his sister is good company, and in part only because she focuses more on herself and getting Krebs to come join her in continuing to enjoy what would be considered normal life. And she acts genuinely happy to see her big brother. His parents, however, just complain about what he does and try to get him to be what they think normal is, really for their benefit rather than his own. The mother is very religious and seems to care more about getting her son to conform to her wishes than focusing on his actual wellbeing.

His conflicted memories and feelings about trying to share his wartime experiences and then lying because he's not saying what people want to hear help to demonstrate the utter disconnect between people who've been in wars and those that just read accounts of it and think they know something about it. Krebs is plainly depressed and absolutely no one helps him with it because they are all making everything about themselves and what they want.

This strange adjustment from military life back to civilian life is a common male experience. (In some societies throughout history women also fought in battles but usually only in warrior-based cultures such as the Vikings where killing and death were interpreted with a different paradigm and were thus less traumatic for combatants. Also it wasn't until WWI that soldiers began to become "shell-shocked", meaning to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, because the advanced technology made the threat of annihilation too constant for many people to process. In more recent times women have been combatants in the U.S., British, and other militaries, but in Hemingway's time any women near the front lines would have been nurses, and would have received some emotional support if they were traumatized.) This piece is a Hemingway story that expresses parts of the male experience, and what was from WWI through Vietnam in the 1970's, a very common experience for American men, largely due to there being drafts for mandatory military service. This isn't surprising since Hemingway was male and this does not in itself make a sexist statement. It's simply writing what he knows, as writers should. This story shows the lack of support or caring for soldiers returning home and the pressure put on them to go on about their lives as if they haven't been irrevocably changed, and damaged, by their experiences. Not just their experiences of war but their experiences of adult socialization. For many young men going off to war would also lead to losing their virginities, and under circumstances that were often less than ideal; cold, brutal, matter-of-fact, with prostitutes, and in general in situations that would not help them to court nice young women or become good husbands once they returned home.

The father in the story is an authoritarian figure who is ever-present in the enforcement of his rules but besides that is notably absent from Krebs' life. The mother is overbearing, controlling, and tries to make everything about how she feels about what's going on with Krebs, whether or not he loves her, and forcing her religious views on Krebs. He ultimately responds by being a dutiful son and saying he loves her and praying with her perfunctorily even though he no longer loves her or believes in her religion. When she asks him to pray and he cannot then asks to pray for him it shows her very overbearing nature and lack of any interest whatsoever in what her son wants or needs. We see that she would gladly control his life completely if he'd let her.

The disconnect between the realities of the war and the banalities of civilian life are further emphasized by the big deal the mother makes of her and his father agreeing to allow him, finally, permission to use the father's car. We figure out in the story that before he was traumatized by the war this would have been a big deal; a sign that they were beginning to

respect him as a young adult. Post-war, however, this is nothing more than an incredibly trivial matter that no longer has any relevance in the catastrophic world of emotional suffering he now inhabits. It makes his parents appear even more ignorant, small-minded, unworldly, and self-involved, especially as it isn't done to show him some respect but to try to control his behavior and get what *they* want out of him; for him to pursue marriage to a nice girl.

In the end he abandons both parents and what society thinks he should be doing and decides to go watch his sister play baseball; a nontraditional activity for a girl. The sister is the only sign of hope or positivity for Krebs in the entire story. This shows that perhaps this female of the new generation, who will not be passive-aggressive, controlling, and selfish like their mother, is the hope for society to have a better future. She, largely through focusing on something she wants and enjoys, and by being genuine and honest, is the savior.

“Mr. and Mrs. Elliot”:

This story about a married couple trying to have a baby seems to be an example of a closeted gay couple. This is seen by the fact they keep trying to have a baby but cannot. The line, “They tried as often as Mrs. Elliott could stand it,” (151) and the frequent references to her not being able to try because she's too sick—with seasickness—seem very telling. She doesn't really want to have sex with him but feels she must. It is a social obligation for a woman and a man to marry, have sex, and then have a baby. They feel obligated to do this then find it does not work for them. In the end he turns to his work as a poet for companionship and she to a girl friend of hers whom she winds up sharing a bed with, separate from her husband. The line, “they had many a good cry together” (154) seems to be a double entendre. At first we assume that when Hemingway says that she and her girl friend cry together it is that they are weeping as women because of Mrs. Elliott's marital problems, but this could also be seen as crying out in sexual pleasure. This seems more likely given that the last line the story is, “and they were all quite happy,” (154) which suggests they weren't crying together out of sadness. Instead it seems that she's a lesbian and he's either gay or asexual and really just wants to spend his nights writing poetry. At first it doesn't sound like he's happy since he's sleeping alone and drinking more white wine, but if the last line is any indication, this alternative lifestyle works for them.

Given that Hemingway traveled in artistic circles, lived in Paris, and was in and around the military it would be surprising if he hadn't met some gay people but in that time period he could not really write directly about it, especially in any obvious approving way, and continue to be a mainstream, successful writer in that time.

The homosexual subtext of this story would most likely not have been noticed by most readers of his time, and he had such a stereotypically masculine public persona that no one would have believed he would write a story that included approval of a homosexual arrangement. Nowadays we can perhaps read his work with the proper amount of open-mindedness. This story is a move away from traditional adult personal relationships and towards more experimental forms of adult relationships.

“Cat in the Rain”:

In this story Hemingway does an excellent job of writing a story from a woman's view about a woman's sexual desires. The entire narrative, save one line, is from her perspective. The wife longs to be a fulfilled woman in material, sensual, and sexual ways. She longs to own nice things, to have long and soft hair to brush, and to have, to paraphrase, a wet pussycat in her lap to stroke.

While she talks the husband reads a paper and barely listens to anything she says. He comes across as a closeted gay man when she asks him if she should grow her hair out, making it more womanly, and the story says, "George looked up and saw the back of her neck, clipped close like a boy's. 'I like it the way it is.'" (159.) Most men in that time, and even today, say they prefer for a woman to have long hair simply because it looks more feminine, more womanly, and is the opposite of most men's hair. Throughout history a woman grew an impressive mane of hair and cared for it diligently in order to attract a husband. In Muslim culture women cover their hair with a headscarf in order to be sexually modest, such is the potential allure and attraction to men of a woman's long, silky mane of hair. So it is very telling that a man would want to keep his wife's hair short even when she does not and sees it as being *like a boy's*. His reason for doing so is very telling or even a little disturbing too when we consider the choice of word: "like a boy's" rather than "like a man's". This could mean that the husband experimented with other boys in his youth before doing his perfunctory social duty of marrying a woman.

In the end the hotel keeper, who's always very nice to her, sends her the wet pussycat—her female sexual desire—to her room. Despite the effects of the "Roaring 20's" and other social advancements in Hemingway's time, sexuality was still tightly censored, especially women's, and especially in his native United States versus Europe. So the way this story is written, seemingly about a cat caught outside in the rain, was a way of getting around the censors. It also stands as a metaphor for women's sexuality being banished from the home and bedroom and left out in the cold by men. But women also stand as a censor in this story, as seen when the maid says, basically, you must stay in the house and not venture out (like a tomcat), and you must not get wet (sexually aroused). This shows the traditional view that women must not enjoy their sexualities and shows how the view is enforced by other (typically older) women.

The typical interpretation of this story has been that the wife wants a baby but really nothing in the story suggests that, most people just tend to assume it because most stories about women throughout the centuries portrayed women in such traditional and religious ways. Women who wanted sex, or wanted anything just for themselves, were portrayed as horrible selfish people who should be punished. This story throws us off because the woman wants to be very womanly yet she is the protagonist and no disparaging statement is made about her. This seems to be Hemingway saying that women have sexual desires and that that's normal and okay.

The traditional reading is also includes the idea that the wife seems petty but that is based on the assumption that we're supposed to side with the husband. The reader could side with the husband, the wife, or sympathize with both or neither of them. Who we sympathize with in the story says more about us than it says about Hemingway.

From *Men without Women*, 1927—

“The Undefeated”:

One of Hemingway’s longer short stories, about a bullfighter fresh out of hospital who tries to keep his waning career going, he imagines he is better at this artful blood sport than he actually is and is badly injured in the process. His comrades try to keep him from having his pride bruised, which would hurt more than the near fatal injuries from bullfighting.

This story works through men’s limitations—Hemingway often writes in a surprisingly open and frank manner about men’s limitations, imagined glories, and bruised pride. It seems he saw that a man must protect his pride at all costs, no matter the physical injuries. This was very indicative of his time period. And it could be because of his acute awareness (which many men of his day, battle-tested, would have shared) of the inevitability of death. Death’s inevitability, and its frequent omnipresence in the lives of men of Hemingway’s time, could be part of why many of these men seemed to frequently have little concern for the possible physical damage to their bodies they faced doing dangerous things like bullfighting.

The man is defeated, before and after the bull fight he faces in the story. He’s already lost whatever career he had, but to admit that would be to let his pride be wounded. He, like most men, must imagine he is undefeated and retains whatever greatness he might have attained as a young man. Men are judged as valuable in our society only by what they produce and not who they are. Older men feel this a lot and very old men feel it the worst; they tend to feel they are a useless burden on their families once they cannot physically work at a job or do a lot of chores around the home and property. Old women feel this less and are often revered for their knowledge, wisdom, and the general ambiance of “hominess” that they provide a family. This is the story of the process of a man losing his value. It is brutal and painful, and helps to capture the loss of vitality that many (or most) men felt after the ultimately pointless ravages of WWI.

“Hills like White Elephants”:

This story begins with a man having control of a woman’s body by convincing her to get an abortion when she doesn’t really want one. This is a story particularly disliked even by pro-choice Feminists because they assume that because Hemingway was a man we are supposed to side with the man in the story. (Their view also considers the story misogynistic because forced abortions and forced births are equally misogynistic as both equally treat a woman’s body as property not her own). As usual they were misunderstanding Hemingway. First, he was writing about things as they were; he was a journalist. It was typical for men who’d “gotten a girl in trouble” as it was called back then, to try to convince her to get an abortion, even a dangerous illegal back alley abortion. Here the man wants her to get an abortion so he can presumably dump her, but either way so he can return to his carefree life of travel and partying. The man is inherently unlikeable not because he wants her to get an abortion or because he wants to go back to a life of fun but because he shows no regard for the woman or

their potential future child. This is seen by the fact he doesn't make statements to the effect of, I'm not ready to be a husband and provider, I don't know how to be a father, I'm too young to be a good father, I don't make enough money to provide for a family. And he doesn't talk to her about her having so much more to do and see before becoming a mother. Additionally, he doesn't try to comfort her by, for example, putting his arm around her. He keeps a physical distance from her. This suggests he is an unlikable character rather than someone the reader is supposed to sympathise with. Given Hemingway's dedication to his children and, according to some biographical accounts, his strong displeasure when Gellhorn got an abortion while they were together, it doesn't make sense to assume that Hemingway wanted the reader to side with the man in this story.

Despite the traditional reading the fact that the story ends with her saying, "I feel fine. There's nothing wrong with me," (263) seems to be saying that in the few minutes he's been gone she's finally made up her mind to keep the fetus. She has decided she will exert control over her own body, even if it means losing him. Echoing some of the sentiment from "Indian Camp" he is showing how men have control over women's bodies and that women must stand up and make decisions about their own bodies for themselves. In the first story men more or less force a woman to give birth, to have a baby. Here a man is trying to force a woman to not give birth. But here, in the end, she finally makes a decision about her own body for herself.

It was a bold and fearless story to write in that time, which possibly shows the European influence on Hemingway. This isn't the sort of subject matter you would expect a Christian from the rural Midwest to write about. Because of the censorship of those times words like "abortion" and "termination" could not be used; the subject is talked around, as is the conclusion, which is why there's been so much speculation about it. But the fact that in the end the woman doesn't refer to her physical state as a "condition" or anything that could sound like she's unwell, and in fact explicitly states that there's nothing wrong with her, very strongly implies that she's decided to leave her physical state as it is and not get an abortion.

Regardless of whether Jig gets an abortion or not, it is a Feminist statement to write honestly about the truths of women's lives and women's bodies.

As a final note I would like to point out that some critics say Hemingway was sexist because in "Cat in the Rain" the man has a name, George, while the woman is simply called the American Wife. Here the man has no name, he is simply the American man, but the woman has a name, Jig. So the former plainly does not show sexism.

From *Winner Take Nothing* (1933)—

"Homage to Switzerland":

This story shows the frequent sexual harassment of women, in this case waitresses in train stations in Switzerland, but they could just as easily be women in the helping professions anywhere. It writes realistically from a waitress' perspective about the strain of being sexually propositioned by male customers and how the men blame them for the harassment. The male

customer in the story telling her that if she doesn't like the attention she should leave when obviously she cannot because she works there.

Once again Hemingway does a great job of transferring from one character's perspective to another, so we briefly see things from the waitress's perspective and see how uncomfortable the man made her and how disgusted she is. Hemingway once again does an excellent job of addressing a women's issue, one which in his time did not get addressed almost at all. In fact, with so many of his stories honing in on issues women face it's hard to imagine why so many critics decided to brand him a misogynist.

The last segment of the story focuses on the National Geographical Society, which seems to tie into the notion of male conquests; women, travel, good photographs, good interviews, interesting foreigners. For some men these are all objects for acquisition rather than people, places, and important historical events. And while the women are stuck having to be nice to men that sexually harass them, the men have the freedom to be off on exciting expeditions experiencing the world.

As with many Hemingway stories, this piece highlights some women's issues, forcing you to see them, rather than putting any stamp of approval on them.

#### "Fathers and Sons":

This story shows appreciation for a father even when he wasn't very good at being a father. It also highlights the lack of sex education in society in that time. The one female character doesn't say much. We get the idea she hasn't had much education. In the scenes she's in, she and Nick are kids who don't really know what they're doing when they fool around with having sex. This is especially obvious when she is almost joking that they'll make a baby. This shows how naïve they are; they kind of understand what they're doing but don't take it seriously enough to show any real understanding of it.

The main character, Nick, is a very caring father who looks after his son. Mothers or mention of them is absent from the story. This is not inherently sexist; one can focus on one group of people in a story without it being an insult to all other groups of people. Surely there are many stories that focus on motherhood and mothering while paying little or no attention to fathers and that doesn't mean they're sexist (although it could mean that they are sexist). Besides that Hemingway didn't have the experience of a nurturing mother. Many people don't. And they have a right to express their experiences like everybody else. The notion of mother as great, loving, and infallible is actually a very unrealistic Christian myth which is part of the patriarchal society that has oppressed women for centuries. Perpetuating that mother stereotype can be misogynistic while writing honestly about all different kinds of mothers is a far more Feministic act.

Nick plainly cares a great deal about being a good father. This is particularly evident in his evaluating his own father and their relationship to take what good parts of it he can, and in his obvious affection for his son, as well as the fact father and son are traveling together. In the story Nick is plainly capable of caring for his son without a woman's help and is happy to do. It is good to encourage such paternal instincts, and was somewhat forward-thinking in that time for a

man to encourage some real deep thinking about a man's father and his influence on one's own parenting.

From the opening section of *The First Forty-Nine Stories* which contains new works (1939)—

“The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber”:

In this story, as with many other Hemingway stories, Hemingway shows a great talent for writing from every character's perspective—man or woman, rich or working class, human or animal. He shows a great capacity to imagine the animals' fear and suffering and it ironically seems to be arguing against hunting even though Hemingway loved hunting. We can surmise from this story, and his close association with Ojibwes and their cultural views on hunting, that Hemingway hated the way a lot of safari tourists hunted. He presumably hated that they had no respect for Mother Nature whereas Hemingway, influenced by Ojibwe culture, believed in respectful hunting.

If one wanted to find sexism in the piece they could see the portrayal of Mrs. Macomber as sexist in that she cheats on her husband for a thrill and later kills him, either with intention or lack of competence with firearms. But this would ignore the inherent fact that none of the human characters in the story are likable. All cheat in some way, as with Macomber and Wilson hunting from a moving vehicle, which is prohibited by local laws and is an incredibly unfair advantage over the animals—as if the advantage of their guns wasn't enough already.

What this piece really seems to show is the disgusting nature of tourist hunting as cheap thrills for spoiled rich people who have no respect for Mother Earth and Mother Nature, no consideration of the harm they do to the animals, its effect on the local environment, no regard for local laws, and no thought of the general wastefulness of the whole activity. This is in direct contravention to the American Indian view that hunting should be done respectfully, hunters should only hunt for food, should use all of the animal they can and leave what they cannot for other animals, and in general show respect and appreciation for Mother Earth.

What I see is that in this story a man is killed off as his wife develops into her own strong person. She has spent her life thinking she needed a husband, then children, then lovers. But in the end all she needs is herself. She seems to finally see this when her husband, Mr. Macomber, shows himself to be a coward. At first she cries, then she sleeps with the far more impressive man, Wilson, and then she kills her husband while trying to shoot at a buffalo. She seems upset afterwards and claims it was an accident, although Wilson doesn't believe her, but much of his internal monologue has essentially already shown us that he's misogynistic; he hates how weak he is when it comes to giving in to sex with women and takes it out on them by blaming them for this weakness and claiming it is essentially because of their evil, and not his weakness. I think her killing her husband was neither an accident nor an intentional act; in a split second a part of her almost subconsciously made the decision to aim just a little off from the animal and kill the husband instead as she became fed up with him and with the idea that she needed him, or any man.

“The Snows of Kilimanjaro”:

This is a safari story with a strong leading female character, much more so than Margot in “The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber”, and she is a far more likable character because she is less selfish. She shows genuine concern for her husband, who has gangrene. Unlike Margot, who only watches the men hunt and often insists on going with them but sometimes stays behind in camp, Helen has become a competent hunter in her own right and is able to hunt for food. She uses her catch to make a good broth for Harry in the hopes he will be healed. Therefore her hunting is far more ethical than the hunting that takes place in “Macomber”, which is purely for sport, and done at times unfairly and illegally.

The long italicized parts of the story make us wonder if many of Hemingway’s stories had these sections before Gertrude Stein helped him edit his work. In the introduction he mentions this story as a favorite, and perhaps this is why. Those sections give us the back story as Harry thinks or day dreams about the past. In the end he imagines the plane has arrived for help to take him high, towards the dream of being rescued, as the leopard on Mount Kilimanjaro rose higher towards some imagined and unattainable goal. In reality he’s died as the hyenas—a strictly matriarchal species—circle closer and get louder while Helen is awakened and cannot hear the hyenas, “for the beating of her heart.” (70).

As Harry, a man who has become useless and wasn’t of much use to her before, dies off she becomes fully alive. He moves towards illusions and day dreams—where women have typically been placed, largely from being kept at home like slaves, unable to go out into the world and experience life. She comes fully into reality, is able to handle it with great strength, competence, and a compassion that was lacking in Margot.

The back story tells us that, like most women, she thought she needed a man, but in the course of the story she is empowered and does not need one anymore. Just as women in Hemingway’s time got the vote in the U.S. and pursued education and jobs more and had no use for medium-strength men. One could even wonder if Hemingway’s at times extreme bravado was an attempt to be a man who would still be valuable no matter how strong women got. Given that Hemingway had two younger sisters (and one older), and he was close with all of them when he still lived at home, it’s entirely likely that he was very aware of women’s struggles for civil rights and was sympathetic to those issues, at least as far as women like his sisters being able to have decent lives with some education and independence, and away from abusive men was concerned. From what we know of him it’s impossible to believe that he would have wanted any of them to be stuck in traditional subservient marriages where they’d have no say in anything. Therefore the character of Helen should most likely be seen in a very positive way, unlike Margot, because she becomes a fully actualized, independent woman, but without seeming to become a man or to actively kill men off. And she remains somewhat maternal as we see when she makes the broth to help her husband.

The man, Harry, dies by his own male folly, by making the kind of stupid mistakes that many men do. He didn’t take the scratch seriously, thinking he was too strong to get infected, that he never infects. Then when it got infected he still didn’t take it seriously. He delayed treating the wound then used weak medicine. He overestimated his own strength and his male bravado overrode his intelligence and knowledge; he knew better but didn’t do better. Modern

woman has not killed him, he has killed himself. He winds up bitter towards her but this type of man—this old world man, must die, and does. A woman would have taken the wound seriously and treated it properly. This is one of many examples where Hemingway writes about the typical follies of men.

Some feminist critics have complained that in Hemingway's stories women have to be like men to be strong. This argument is inherently misogynistic as it frames things like hunting, fishing, camping, or taking charge as being exclusively the domain of men. In Hemingway's stories this is not so, thus making him more feminist than any Feminist who uses this argument against Hemingway's work. It is far more likely that he was simply aware that some people like hunting regardless of their sex. Just as people of either sex—not just women—value being a parent and spending time with their children, just as Hemingway loved being a father. We can assume he had a good relationship with his children as his son Patrick edited one of his books when he was an adult. This shows that Hemingway didn't see child-rearing as exclusively the domain of women. (In fact Hotchner's book shows Hemingway's dedication to the wellbeing of his children while Pauline was trying to create problems in his relationships with his two younger sons. This means that sometimes he was the nurturing, "motherly", parent while she was the harmful, (emotionally) abusive one.)

Additionally, Hemingway would have been familiar with animals in Africa, including lions, who defy gender stereotypes by being the hunters, and hyenas, who are strictly matriarchal. This, along with his Ojibwe-influenced respect for animals and nature, would have made him see that it can be natural for females to be strong and in command.

## Chapter 2 – Rereading Hemingway: a New Feminist Critique of a Sample from *The First Forty-Nine Stories*: Stories from Women’s Perspectives

From part of the section of *The First Forty-Nine Stories* considered “early writings” (1923)—

“Up in Michigan”:

This is a surprisingly frank story for 1923. In this piece Hemingway brilliantly writes a story from a young woman’s point of view. Except for his distinctive minimalist style, if you did not know who wrote it, you would think it had been written by a woman because of how well it captures the experience and perspective of a young, naive woman who’s in love but totally ignorant as to how to pursue it. Her awkwardness is believable, as is her vulnerability, which—as with other Hemingway stories—makes the case for sex education without him coming out and saying it.

Liz is a young woman in a small town who does not understand her developing attraction to an older man, Jim, or how to express her interest in him. Her ambivalence is captured very accurately in the portrayal of the virginal longing for sexuality mixed with simultaneous fear of it, which is also indicative of a time period when most people in the U.S. were taught nothing about puberty or sexual development.

Her simultaneous pain and enjoyment when she does have sex with Jim is also realistic, as is her lack of understanding that although she found him attractive and was willing to go walking with him he did technically assault her. If asked the character would no doubt say he hadn’t, largely as she still hopes they can have a romance, and she would say she did want him. In the end her feelings are distorted, confused, and she cannot really comprehend that she’s been taken away from the safety of others to be used. She does not comprehend that she’s actually been assaulted and still foolishly, tragically, clings to an idea there’s romance and real feelings between her and Jim. We can see that this is incredibly unlikely as he plainly has no regard whatsoever for her. He is first oblivious to her then kisses her only after he’s drunk and everyone else has left. He leads her away from everyone and more or less slams her against hard wood in a warehouse on a cold dock before falling asleep. This is blatantly cruel given that he could easily guess she was a virgin and had real emotional feelings for him.

She is left cold, lonely, crying, and with a clouded view (a fog rolling in). Everything that should have been great was a huge disappointment.

This story really highlights the idealized, romanticized, fairytale idea that girls and young women have of men in their minds and the reality of men; oblivious and uncaring (doesn’t even notice her though she adores him), often absent (left on a long hunting trip), brutal (killed many

animals on said hunting trip), rowdy and self-involved (gets drunk then finally notices her because he got horny from drink, then takes her to a cold, dirty place to use her for quick, painful sex), totally unreliable (falls dead asleep after the sex, leaving her to literally crawl out from under him). In one fell swoop this story slays the romantic notions of man as valiant prince who will act as rescuer and protector of women. If anything it is a warning to young women that they should not think too highly of men nor let their feelings blind better judgment.

Her first experience of sex was awful, and now she has to just hope she will not get pregnant and have to either seek a potentially deadly illegal abortion, live in shame as an unwed mother, or wind up forced to marry this man that clearly has no regard whatsoever for her wellbeing.

This story, as a warning to young women about men, reminds me that Hemingway had three sisters, and, given his sex, his gender, the era he grew up in, and his mother's religion he would have been expected to act as a guardian of his sisters, and by extension their sexualities, as is typical with traditional families and religious cultures. Thus this story could have been written as a brotherly warning for them.

However, considering that according to some accounts he let them have more fun than he was supposed to (even just by picnicking outside) and got in trouble for it. And considering that all his sisters looked up to their charismatic brother they doubtless would have confided a great deal in him. Thus this story might be about one of his sister's first experiences of sex. Some critics have commented that because of how close he was with his sisters growing up they find it surprising that he didn't write about them more. Perhaps he did and just disguised it. Or perhaps this is an experience he learned of through a girlfriend. In any event, he plainly had a much better understanding of women's experiences than most critics have given him credit for.

From *Winner Take Nothing*, 1933—

“One Reader Writes”:

This story is another Hemingway indictment of the lack of sex education in his time; the woman knows so little that she doesn't know how to spell syphilis, doesn't really know what it is, and doesn't know how her husband could have gotten it, nor whether or not he's right that it can be cured. (Penicillin was only invented in 1928.) This story shows immense sympathy and understanding for the helpless and victimized situation of many women.

Hemingway would have been familiar with how often men, especially soldiers, away from their wives contracted Sexually Transmitted Diseases (what were then called venereal diseases) and how they would then often give those diseases to innocent and ignorant wives who'd been faithful when they got home. The husband in this story is a little better as he has been tested for disease and he refuses to have sex with his wife until he's cured. Other men did neither of those things (which continues to be a common problem with husbands throughout the world today, especially in developing nations such as India.)

## Chapter 3 – Rereading Hemingway: a New Feminist Critique of a Sample from *The First Forty-Nine Stories*: Stories without Women

Let me begin this chapter by saying that I don't think the absence of women characters should necessarily be seen as sexist for a few reasons. First, in Hemingway's time the two sexes were kept separate more and had more time apart from each other than is common in the West today, especially in military settings. Second, writing about one person's or group's experiences does not in itself convey a message of hatred towards other groups; it usually only expresses that a writer is following the idea that writers should only "Write what you know." Third, When one sex is physically absent from a story they are usually if not always still in the story somewhere. For example, in "One Reader Writes" the story has one female character and no male characters. Two men are mentioned, the husband and the doctor, but neither is technically in the story. Or in "My Old Man" the mother is deceased but is mentioned and we can feel her absence in the boy's life.

From *In Our Time*, 1925—

"On the Quai at Smyrna":

This story was inspired by some of Hemingway's work as a war correspondent. The piece seems to be written from the perspective of a traditional, Victorian-era military man. It is very matter-of-fact and unemotional about war, as men going to battle had to be trained to be. It is not fair to judge such men by today's criteria; the modern man has been shaped by the effects of modern Feminism and the call for men to become more caring partners and more involved fathers. This has led modern men in the West to be more sensitive to women's issues, women health concerns (such as the women with dead babies and the women having babies in this story), and as they've received more paternal affection and less discipline than previous generations they have by and large grown gentler and more in touch with emotions. The narrator in this story lacks all of that modern influence. He is a man of those times, speaking very matter-of-factly, as a man Hemingway might meet in a warzone would. Additionally, this male voice is not the narrator. It is clear that the narrator is only conveying his message, seemingly impartially, as a journalist is supposed to.

This masculine character is so emotionally disconnected that he has no real attachment to what he's seen and is unable to actually process it. He is essentially as much a machine as the guns soldiers use. He can only report the facts; he does not react to them. He speaks of harsh realities very bluntly, like when he says, "The worst... were the women with dead babies. You could not get the women to give up their dead babies. They had babies dead six days... had to take them away finally." (79.) And, "You didn't mind the women who were having babies as you did those with the dead ones. They had them all right. Surprising how few of them died. You just covered them over with something and let them go to it. They'd always pick the darkest places in the hold to have them." (80.) The man speaking to the narrator might seem cold but we have to consider the larger context; the time period and how men were raised in it, as well as the fact this narrator has probably been on a battlefield watching people being killed many times. His emotional detachment is the only thing that will keep him functional under the circumstances. Those of us that haven't seen war firsthand and haven't had to toughen up to survive it are not fully able to judge someone who has. This story does an excellent job of showing how inhumane and perhaps inhuman one must become to survive such things. It subliminally makes the argument against warfare by showing how it dehumanizes even those that do manage to survive it.

Additionally, the masculine man's coldness can be seen as an indictment of how cold men in wars typically are about how their wars affect women. It's interesting that in this story the main focus becomes the female experience of warfare even though no woman gets a voice in the story. These women are fleeing to a quay and hoping to escape. They are alone, they are not accompanied by fathers or husbands (still their social protectors in that time). And indeed many women are raped in wars therefore many of the women with babies or having babies surely must have gotten pregnant from rapes, others perhaps via prostitution. It is very interesting that the man who told all this to the narrator seems to have a total disconnect from how the women might have gotten pregnant (or perhaps Hemingway had to leave those parts out because of the censors of his time). Furthermore, it says that the women were covered by the men, and that they themselves picked the darkest places to give birth. This shows a censoring of women's lives and women's suffering by both men and then women themselves. It is feminist for Hemingway to then speak up about their experiences.

The focus of the last paragraph is particularly telling when framed in Hemingway's Ojibwe-influenced context; men breaking the legs of their cattle and pushing them into the water to drown. In Ojibwe beliefs one is supposed to show respect for animals, some of whom—such as the wolf and dog—are seen as brothers to original man and modern man (Callahan.) The man speaking to the narrator ends by saying, "All those mules with their forelegs broken pushed over into the shallow water. It was all a pleasant business. My word, yes, a most pleasant business." (80) This shows the brutal callousness that many men involved in wars had in Hemingway's time. There was no appreciation for life; women, babies, animals, the planet, the ecosystem (Mother Nature). This could also be a reference to the Christian Noah's Ark story, which Hemingway would have learned from his religious mother; here all the animals are being drowned to death because of the war rather than saved during a flood that will supposedly wash the world clean.

“The Battler”:

This story could be seen as making a racial statement as the black character Nick encounters is nicer and more levelheaded than the white one he encounters. Additionally, it could be making a statement about male bravado or more specifically the bravado of white men or the “white man”, as the boxer invites Nick over for some food and coffee then turns violent and wants to fight for no reason. His friend, the black man, has to calm him down by whacking him on the head. He then lets Nick eat and have some coffee before saying he should leave. The black hobo seems slightly crazy, but smarter about it than the white hobo; he’s smart enough to know if he’s crazy and if so how crazy he is, so he knows when it’s not safe for Nick to stay any longer, and makes sure Nick leaves in time.

Between the brakeman tricking him then attacking him and the boxer inviting him to his campfire then turning violent it shows the dangers that a young man faces while in the company of other men. Many stories in books, including some fairytales such as “Little Red Riding Hood”, focus on young women developing a sense of the danger they’re in when around strange men but not as many show us the dangers men face when around strange men. This story is part of Nick’s coming of age. If anything this might suggest some sympathy towards the dangers women face when dealing with strange men as it shows a lack of, sort of, holding men on a pedestal and acting as if they can do no wrong and that if a woman is attacked she must have provoked it. Here Nick is attacked by one man (the brakeman) for no reason then almost attacked by another (the former boxer) for no reason but is saved by the other man (the black friend). Two of the men in the story are violent and cannot be trusted and through no fault of Nick’s; he was not “asking for it”.

“My Old Man”:

Women are not a feature in this story as the boy’s mother is dead before the story starts. It is a story about men, male bonding, fathers and sons, and the lies and bullshitting some men do. Through this story Hemingway is able to criticize men, their big talk, and their lies. His narrative choice of telling this story through the eyes of a kind and innocent boy makes the message all the more stinging and painful.

This story leaves one to wonder what the psychological and emotional effects on a boy are when he is disillusioned about his father (or what the effects of similar disillusionment about a mother would be on a girl if our society would ever stop worshipping the image of mother as inherently infallible to the point of victim-blaming when genuine cases of physical, emotional, and even sexual abuse by mothers is proved; society’s impulse is to ask why a mother behaved one way or another and empathize while it’s impulse with men is simply to attack.)

This story is very critical of men, demonstrating that Hemingway had no belief in male infallibility.

“Big Two-Hearted River” (part 1) and “Big Two-Hearted River” (part 2):

These two stories show a man's love of the outdoors, camping, fishing, and solitude. It does make the reader wonder if there's a reason *why* the man wants this solitude. He could be out there for no other reason than his own love of camping and fishing or he could be avoiding something at home. If he is getting away from something at home then it is interesting to note that traditionally this is male therapy; space, solitude, and focusing on projects and accomplishments in the here and now rather than whatever the thing is that is or was bothering them.

Our society has popularized psychotherapy as a way to "deal with" one's "issues". Interestingly, psychotherapeutic counseling has often proved a failure; people undergoing such counseling often don't get any better, in fact they feel emotionally worse. (Grohol, and Jarrett.) This isn't surprising when you consider that counseling, by and large, involves perpetually dragging out past hurts and wallowing in them. Talking about them habitually and, metaphorically, taking sprouts and nurturing them into huge plants that take up the whole room and all of one's time.

The feminine approach to problems, that of the counseling which is so popular in today's Western culture, can be seen as nearly making cancerous tumors out of one's "issues", whereas the masculine approach, as Nick uses in this story, that of going off and focusing on something else, a project, and typically alone, however, is ironically far more therapeutic. It shows one that they are capable, strong, able to handle anything, and have a lot going on in their life *now*; it causes one to live current successes rather than to die (focus on the past) in one's past hurts.

Thus if this trip is a balm for Nick it is no doubt an extremely effective one.

Beyond the subtext side of things, the surface details show us a great deal about Nick's character; he carefully avoids doing unnecessary harm to the environment, demonstrating an Ojibwe American Indian influence on his actions, one of respecting Mother Earth/Nature. This is seen when Nick only takes as many grasshoppers as he'll actually need for bait and catches them in the early morning when they're immobile from cold morning dew, rather than later in the day when he'd have to kill some in order to catch others. He wets his hand before touching a trout to avoid killing it with a fungus that develops from the touch of a dry hand (which would also feel rough and presumably unpleasant to the fish). The narration mentions that Nick has seen many dead trout with the telling white fungus and that he prefers to fish alone as other men, not of your party, ruin it. In a larger sense this makes a statement about white men destroying nature. Also, when he cuts two fish's guts out, he throws out the innards for the minks—for other animals to consume. In keeping with American Indian customs he is not wasteful with any part of the animals he kills, which shows his respect for them and for nature. As much as he can he is living in harmony with nature. He has left brutal modern civilization to live in a more pure state.

Although Nick—like Hemingway himself—is very masculine he shows respect for Mother Nature and does his best to live in balance with nature rather than to simply destroy it. This is not surprising given that the story title seems to be an Anglicized version of an American Indian name.

From *Men without Women*, 1927—

“Now I Lay Me”:

In this story the experience of losing one’s nerves and some of one’s sanity from wartime traumas is explored. This experience was very common for men in Hemingway’s time and we would now recognize this as symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. It’s telling that there are no women there as they lay in the straw. A woman’s touch, a woman’s homemaking, a woman’s food, under the circumstances would be medicine. It would provide comfort. These men have none. They don’t even have beds, just straw. It’s also interesting that when a woman does enter the story, in Nick’s memories of his mother, she does not offer any comfort.

When Nick thinks of his childhood he remembers his mother burning his father’s prized possessions without even asking. Her memory is not a source of comfort. Many men in the same situation would think of their mother or wife and going home to a warm house to rest, thinking everything will be better once he sees her again. Perhaps part of Nick’s anxiety is that he has nothing to make him believe things will be better when he leaves his bed of straw, or even when he leaves the war because his home and mother offer no comfort. This doesn’t make the story sexist, it conveys a truth that is still considered taboo in our society: that some mothers are abusive. The response that some critics have had when Hemingway began to express this experience in his stories was to brand him a misogynist, blame the victim, and deny that there could be any truth to this notion. Yet in our society it would be considered socially acceptable for artists to express notions of bad fathers or abusive fathers and such notions typically illicit sympathy.

In the memories Nick sides with his father and, when told to, helps him retrieve what from the fire has been destroyed, such as valuable metal tools. It seems to be a metaphor; a man must try to retrieve himself from the fire, to salvage what he can, though a great deal of himself will be lost, destroyed irretrievably. It could also mean that one cannot trust women as they will throw men in the fire, and that men must rely on other males for help. This isn’t necessarily a misogynistic idea if it was a genuine artistic expression of the experiences of a man who had been hurt by women. If a reader finds it hard to believe that then they should try reversing the sex of every character in the story and read it that way.

From *Winner Take Nothing*, 1933—

“A Day’s Wait”:

This story shows a man’s paternal instincts as he cares for and worries about his young son who is very ill. His worry is less all-consuming than a typical mother’s. This, ironically, shows a lack of selfishness which is inherent in a father’s approach to caring for children. Often a mother’s worry about her ill child becomes as much a focus as a child’s illness. At times a

mother's worry surpasses a child's illness as a family's focus and the family begins to worry more about what affect her worry will have on her than the sick child. And other times some mothers' worry is overblown and is used to get attention. Fathers don't do this; they generally give a child's illnesses and other concerns as much worry as they actually warrant and do not make such problems about themselves. The father character's lack of overblown worry helps to calm the boy towards the end of the story and ensures that he understands he really isn't going to die. The father has checked his temperature, had a doctor visit, and given him time to rest. He handles the situation correctly and makes sure that he knows for a fact the boy will be okay, and he calmly (and therefore convincingly) conveys this to his boy. He handles the entire situation correctly and thus solves the problem.

From the opening section of *The First Forty-Nine Stories*, which contains new works (1939)—

“Old Man at the Bridge”:

In this story the old man is upset because he had to leave his animals, both house pets and farm animals. This could be seen as nontraditional for men as the man was kind of a mother figure to these animals and is more broken up about having to leave these surrogate babies of his than he is about the fact he's in grave danger in a war-torn area. In fact he becomes too upset about having to leave them to continue fleeing for his life, even when the man he's talking to tries to help him. The story contradicts the view of men as instinctively selfish. Instead of just fleeing with an “every man for himself!” attitude the old man worries about his “babies” while the narrator worries about the old man. The narrator only leaves when he finally has to concede that the old man has given up and doesn't want to go on without his “babies”.

## **Epilogue**

In conclusion, there are plainly many different ways we can interpret artistic works, and historical figures. These interpretations are largely influenced by each individual's own prejudices and agendas. This being the case, there may in fact be no truly accurate way to interpret anyone's works, or to really know another person. Thus all interpretations of Hemingway's work must be seen in the context of who wrote those interpretations and why. But we should not just take critics', our teachers', or others' opinions of anything on and assume it is fact. We must explore it for ourselves, thinking critically and forming our own opinions.

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