

The Gender Continuum in Ernest Hemingway's War Novels

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Some contemporary feminist critics have labeled Ernest Hemingway's fiction as machismo, misogynist propaganda. However, a comprehensive character analysis of his war-related novels—*A Farewell to Arms*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—suggests an entirely different, perhaps even progressive conclusion about Hemingway's writing. The protagonists of these novels are male war veterans who are struggling to cope with the disillusionment of World War I and the Spanish Civil War. Although the female characters are secondary, they too are forced to adapt to an evolving gender-role system: "As the war initiated and accelerated a period of sudden, often traumatic change, former structural relations between men and women became increasingly blurred...For many observers, the boundary between 'male' and 'female' was the most significant casualty of war" (Bonds 123-124). While some of the characters in Hemingway's war novels can be described as sexist stereotypes, many also blur the patriarchally defined gender role prescriptions; in creating such characters, Hemingway actually presents a continuum of gender.

Robert Jordan, the protagonist of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, is a quintessentially if stereotypically macho man: he's an intelligent soldier who sacrifices his own life for a greater cause and whose only fear is "of not doing my duty as I should" (FWTBT 91). Ironically, his profound duty is to a republic to which he does not actually belong; Jordan is an American professor who teaches Spanish in Montana, so his overwhelming sense of duty to Republican Spain seems largely self-imposed, or even invented. Jordan "ferverently" identifies with the cause of a country of which he is fond and in which he has spent a significant amount of time, but whether this provides enough motivation to risk one's life is questionable. Grand heroic behavior is characteristic of a "manly man"; he valiantly risks his life for a noble cause simply because he believes it is the ethical thing to do, even if the success or failure of that cause would only affect him minimally. Further indication of Robert's machismo is his ability to woo women. Jordan effortlessly romances Maria, and his success is remarkable if one remembers that Maria is a rape victim who is struggling with feelings of immeasurable shame when she first meets Jordan. It is through Jordan's love for her that Maria is again able to feel that she is worthy and capable of receiving love.

Even when circumstances prove dire and insurmountable, Robert remains in control and cool-headed; he cannot be shaken, and he never allows himself to panic. After he is crushed by his horse and suffers from a badly broken leg, he is able to convince his band of friends to leave him behind. His inner dialogue at this point reveals unimaginable bravery and unwavering, almost delusional confidence as he faces death: “There are many worse things than this. Everyone has to do this, one day or another. You are not afraid of it once you know you have to do it...Dying is only bad when it takes a long time and hurts so much that it humiliates you. That is where you have all the luck, see?...It’s wonderful they’ve got away” (*FWTBT* 466-468). In terms of a gender continuum, Jordan represents a thoroughly masculine figure.

Frederic Henry, the fascinating protagonist of *A Farewell to Arms*, purposefully shifts gender roles as he transitions from his role as a voluntary soldier bound by a loose sense of duty to his role as a lovesick deserter. At the beginning of the novel, Henry appears to be a fairly traditional masculine character. He is an American lieutenant who has bravely volunteered to serve alongside the Italian army in their ongoing war against the Central Powers, but unlike Robert Jordan, Henry volunteers for no compelling ideological reason. Rinaldi, a surgeon with whom Henry serves on the Italian front, remarks on the peculiarity of Frederic’s serving in the Italian army and asks Henry why he joined. Henry replies with ambivalence: “I don’t know...There isn’t always an explanation for everything” (*AFTA* 15). Although Henry lacks all sense of patriotism and does not identify with any political cause, he seems able to muster a vague sense of purpose in serving, which is one of protection: “I believe we should get the war over...It would not finish it if one side stopped fighting. It would only be worse if we stopped fighting...They [the enemy] come after you. They take your home. They take your sisters” (*AFTA* 43). After his extended hospital stay, Henry returns to his operations at the front, but he quickly loses what little sense of duty he previously held: “It evidently made no difference whether I was there to look after things or not...the whole thing seemed to run better while I was away” (*AFTA* 16-17). As Alex Vernon has argued, Henry’s military position offers him an opportunity that serves “as a liberation from domestic, economic, and social obligations, and a reassertion of manly autonomy” (38), but he appears neither to want nor care about such values. His fleeing the war is by no means a choice made out of cowardice: he escapes wrongful execution by frustrated, paranoid Italians. Moreover, by doing so he successfully escapes the patriarchal expectations set for him by fleeing to Switzerland with Catherine; Switzerland, as Marc Hewson asserts, “provides the lovers with an area outside the masculine laws of war and, by extension, outside the laws governing gender identity” (53).

Henry’s rejection of patriarchal expectations opens up an entirely new space for him to explore a different gender role. The social and environmental pressures to remain aggressive are removed once he is in Switzerland, and Henry relishes this newfound liberation by embracing passivity. As Vernon notes, during “Hemingway’s time [a passive position] was associated with the feminine” (37). After his desertion, Henry becomes utterly focused on Catherine, her pregnancy, and her happiness. This is a profound transformation as the earlier Henry had relations with prostitutes and saw Catherine as a fun distraction or as another sexual conquest. He also begins to exhibit a degree of open-mindedness about gender-bending. Catherine proposes cutting her hair short so that she

and her lover can have matching coiffures, and at first, Henry tells her, “I wouldn’t let you” (*AFTA* 299). Then, when Catherine presses him about it, he changes his mind



Ernest Hemingway in London at Dorchester Hotel in 1944, by unknown photographer. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, National Archives Identifier 192672. <https://commons.wikimedia.org>.

desertion, and his embrace of a passive, unorthodox lifestyle that places him on a gender role continuum somewhere between a traditionally macho figure and an androgynous, domesticated one.

The most androgynous character in all of Hemingway’s war novels is undoubtedly Pilar from *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Pilar’s physical description is almost entirely masculine:

Pilar is...a woman of about fifty almost as big as Pablo, almost as wide as she was tall, in black peasant skirt and waist, with heavy wool socks on heavy legs, black rope-soled shoes and a brown face like a model of a granite monument. She had big but nice looking hands and her thick curly black hair was twisted into a knot on her neck. (*FWTBT* 30)

Among her other masculine traits are her “deep voice” (*FWTBT* 30), and the gypsy calls her “something very barbarous...but brave” (*FWTBT* 26) and says that “she has a tongue that scalds and that bites like a bullwhip” (*FWTBT* 28). The critic Karen Engle makes an important observation of Pilar: “She is stereotypical of those women who are permitted to act as men and be treated as men. Pilar is neither sexually attractive nor in need of the

protection for which Maria's vulnerability cries out...That all on the mission see her as physically unattractive seems to lend her credibility" (948).

However, Pilar also occupies traditionally feminine spaces as well. She takes on several roles throughout the novel, and her most consistent role is similar to that of a homemaker: she cooks, she cleans, and she mothers Maria. She's even referred to as "Pablo's woman" several times before her actual name is introduced. Pilar also conveys her femininity through her sexuality. She nostalgically tells of her passionate younger days with an ex-lover who was a bullfighter, and she is not embarrassed to share when she has made love with Pablo. While some critics, Stacey Guill for example, consider her sexual openness as a sign that "she consistently ignores cultural propriety" (10), it is clear that her sensitivity is largely still intact despite the atrocities that she has both participated in and witnessed. Pilar discusses a particularly emotional incident that forced her to engage in intense introspection, and her subsequent feelings suggest a stereotypically feminine sensitivity: "I myself had felt much emotion at the shooting of the guardia civil by Pablo...I felt a feeling of shame and distaste...I wished that I might disassociate myself altogether from the lines, and I walked away...I felt an actual sickness in all of me inside and a sweating and a nausea as though I had swallowed bad seafood" (*FWTBT* 118-119). Pilar recognizes the ugliness of this man's death, and it profoundly affects her. While many critics deem Pilar a warrior figure, and she is, she is in touch with her femininity as well. Her gender blurring makes her an ideal center point on a gender continuum as she functions in both masculine and feminine roles.

Brett Ashley from *The Sun Also Rises* is an ideal depiction of a mostly traditional, mostly feminine woman who engages in behaviors typically reserved for men. Brett is repeatedly described as "lovely" throughout the novel, and yet her appearance is not entirely feminine. Her first description reads, "Brett was damned good-looking. She wore a slipover jersey and a tweed skirt, and her hair was brushed back like a boy's...She was built with curves like the hull of a racing yacht, and you missed none of it with that wool jersey" (*TSAR* 29-30). As Ira Elliott explains, "Brett...evokes androgyny and gender ambiguity in both physical appearance (her hair) and attire (her jersey)" (77). It is important to note that her femininity is not limited to her appearance. Toward the beginning of the novel, Brett drops by Jake's flat; he's lying face down on his bed feeling "rotten" and confesses, "Oh, Brett, I love you so much." Brett sits down next to him, kisses his forehead, strokes his head, and says, "Poor old darling" (*TSAR* 61-62). She responds to Jake's anguish with tenderness and sensitivity, perhaps even in a motherly way; it is in this context that her feminine, nurturing side shines. Later in the novel she selflessly leaves the handsome young bullfighter Romero: "I'm thirty-four, you know. I'm not going to be one of these bitches that ruins children" (*TSAR* 242). This is another instance in which Brett's sensitivity is evident. Todd Onderdonk suggests that "She herself worries that her actions are those of a 'bitch,' and she ultimately reins in her desires in order to spare Romero from destruction" (11). Several men are drawn to her irresistible charm and her beauty throughout the novel, and she does depend on men financially. After her break up with Romero, for example, she finds herself in need of help, and she relies on Jake to rescue her from the situation. In all of these ways she is a stereotypical, feminine figure.

In many other ways, however, she occupies a more masculine space. As critic Wendy Martin observes, "Brett aggressively expresses her sexual desires, while her lovers

wait to be chosen; she likes action—noisy public gatherings, large parties, the blood and gore of the bullfight” (Martin 75¹ qtd. in Willingham 44). Brett likes to party and drink; she does not confine herself to cafes and the theater. Moreover, Brett unapologetically exercises her sexual freedom throughout the novel, and her promiscuity is more characteristic of typical masculine behavior. Kathy G. Willingham notes, “Brett’s smoking, screwing, and swearing are not conventionally feminine traits” (44). She is also a risk-taker, which is another stereotypically masculine quality. By interacting with strangers, Brett places herself in potentially dangerous situations where she may be vulnerable, and she does this more than once with both the count and Romero. One could even argue that her escapade with Cohn is potentially dangerous considering they were not deeply familiar with one another. Beyond her immediate safety, “by exercising sexual freedom she risks disease, pregnancy, or ostracism” (Martin 77² qtd. in Willingham 48). Brett can neither be categorized as fully feminine nor ambiguously androgynous, so her character naturally falls somewhere between those distinctions.

If Robert Jordan is a figure who is fully saturated in masculinity, Maria from *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is his feminine complement. Her physical descriptions throughout the novel use provocative language that is indicative of traditional femininity. For example, Hemingway describes her breasts as “small, round, and tight” (*FWTBT* 356), and he projects a certain feminine innocence about her in the way that she “moved awkwardly as a colt moves, but with that same grace as of a young animal” (*FWTBT* 25). Despite her prior suffering of rape, Hemingway manages to retain a virginal quality in Maria given that she “cannot kiss...I do not know how...I have never kissed any man” (*FWTBT* 70-71). Her femininity is further evident in both her demeanor and behavior. As Stacey Guill comments, “nineteen-year-old Maria seems to exhibit the traditional behavior of the stereotypical Spanish woman: docility, subservience, and abnegation. She is Jordan’s ‘little rabbit’ and utters sentences such as, ‘and do you like me too? Do I please thee?’” (12). Not only is she obedient, but Maria is also sent away and excluded from conversations that surround politics and strategy. This exclusion implies that she is too fragile, too naïve, or simply incapable of worthy contribution in such domains, which are stereotypical justifications for the exclusion of feminine women. Furthermore, her actions at the camp are solely limited to cooking, cleaning, and having sex with Robert Jordan. Unfortunately, her earlier victimization seems to define her throughout the entire novel. It is important to note that while Maria is Hemingway’s most stereotypical depiction of a feminine damsel-in-distress, she also appears to make significant progress in self-development. She learns to shoot a gun, and she later experiences militant action first-hand. By the end of the novel, she is not entirely a victim.

Other characters are, of course, worthy of this same discussion: Jake Barnes, Pablo, Catherine Barkley, Rinaldi, and others. However, the characters discussed here are eloquent, distinct illustrations of a variety of genders on Hemingway’s gender continuum. As critic Linda Patterson Miller concludes, “There is no collective Hemingway man, there is no collective Hemingway woman” (10). Hemingway’s characters are multi-dimensional,

¹ Wendy Martin, “Brett Ashley as New Woman in *The Sun Also Rises*,” *New Essays on The Sun Also Rises*, Ed. Linda Wagner-Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), 75.

² Wendy Martin, “Brett Ashley as New Woman in *The Sun Also Rises*,” *New Essays on The Sun Also Rises*, Ed. Linda Wagner-Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), 65-82.

even when they are secondary, and their complexities suggest that he may not be quite the misogynist he is so often branded.

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