HEMINGWAY’S FEMALE CHARACTERS - A GLANCE

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ABSTRACT

Hemingway wrote in the 1920s demonstrates a variety of references to women in which the nouns “girl” and “women” are used more selectively and more purposefully than in his letters. When writing of women, he made clear distinctions in his terms while preserving the colloquial tone and mood of a given piece. Hemingway did not merely “retain” most of this material, especially the nouns with which he referred to his female characters, the initial reference to the main female characters and any subsequent, subtle changes appear in the fluent early drafts. These stories are filled with Hemingway women. “Homage to Switzerland”, with its repetitions of “girl”, “waitress”, “Mademoiselle”, “Signorina”, and “Fraulein”, offers the most complex treatment of “girl” as “waitress”. Women in relationships are also “girls”, female characters whose sexual identity and maturity is not recognized or acknowledged by another important character, usually a partner as seen in “Cat in the Rain”. Hemingway himself referred to many of his characters as “girls”.


INTRODUCTION

Hemingway’s love stories are inhabited by couples in conflict, couples whose lives we get a glimpse of at some moment of high tension, illumination or dramatic change. Hemingway reveals the nature of their lives and their relationships in various ways in the short stories, and one of the most subtle and consistent means by which he does this is by naming, renaming, and “unnaming” his characters, especially the women who are central to the stories. Hemingway, however, does not simply give his characters significant names, although, of course, he often does this: Catherine, Cat, Jig, Helen, Renata. More precisely, the references to the women in much of Hemingway’s work are common nouns that, along with their modifiers, pinpoint a woman’s place in a relationship with these references remaining static or changing depending upon how a given relationship unfolds during the course of a story. These references become mirrors of the conflicts in which the women find themselves. A close study of the manuscript version of many of these works shows Hemingway’s use of the nouns “woman”, “wife”, and
especially, “girl”, to be important and purposeful, a necessary link between technique and theme. Such a look at the creative process finds Hemingway working at an exacting level as he explores the women’s dilemmas and reveals to us something essential about their lives.

In the opening pages of A Farewell to Arms, the captain and Rinaldi speak of the “girls” in the town, “the fine girls. . .beautiful young girls”, alluding to the prostitutes in the town where the men are stationed. Such references continue as Catherine Barkely is introduced in the novel: “beautiful girls. . . New girls. . . beautiful English girls. . . Miss Barkley”. Rinaldi immediately declares “I will probably marry Miss Barkley”. It is into this atmosphere of sexual tension, built on the repetition of “girls” that Frederic Henry first goes to Catherine.

In an excised section of the To Have and Have Not manuscript, Tommy and Roddy discuss Tommy’s wife, Helene Bradley, referring to her at once as “a beautiful woman” and “an awfully romantic girl”. In a manuscript fragment, Hemingway writes of “…a man from up north marries a Key West girl”. Then, the word “girl” could be loaded, carrying with it a sense of youth, sexual availability, marriageability, and subservience. And become narrower today. As Hemingway’s letters reveal, this then accepted colloquial noun was one he used freely and naturally all of his life.

Not only did Hemingway refer to the women he married and was attracted to throughout his life as “girls”, and to his friends wives and mistresses as “girls”, in several of his letters he also purposefully confused gender-specific nouns, both to emphasize a woman’s inclusion in the group, the company of “the men” and to point to a person’s homosexuality. To Gertrude Stein he wrote “It is up to us, ie. Alice Toklas, Me, Hadley, John Hadley Nicanor and other good men to get, thereby including Alice Toklas and Hadley in the noun “men”. Of Stein he wrote: “Gertrude Stein and I are just like brothers”. When John Dos Passos married Kate Smith, Hemingway wrote them: “Glad to see you men are married”.

These wives and friends, men and women, are part of the skilled and knowledgeable company of “the men”; then are the complicated “citizens” of a private world who have “the gen” and whose sexual connections, orientation, or identity can be hinted at in the play of a single word. The idea of forcing the question of sexual identity and sexual role playing into the variations of a single noun would come to play an integral part in Hemingway’s fiction, especially in “The Sea Change”. Across the River and into the Trees, and The Garden of Eden. Hemingway consistently used the noun “girls” with all of its colloquial connotations, and experimented with it in his letters, a use which carried over to his journalism and ultimately to his fiction.

The journalism Hemingway wrote in the 1920s demonstrates a variety of references to women in which the nouns “girls” and “women” are used more selectively and more purposefully than in his letters. When writing of women, he made clear distinctions in his terms while preserving the colloquial tone and mood of a given piece. Hence, in his serious articles about the retreat from Thrace, he wrote of “woman in labor” and of the “old. . women” who were fleeing; while he wrote more lightheartedly of the “really beautiful girls in Pamplona” and the “beautiful girl” in the kimono who had survived an earthquake in Yokohama. Writing from the Economic Conference in Genoa in 1922, Hemingway wrote two articles mentioning the women in attendance. In one, “Russian Girls at Genoa”, it is the Russian clerical workers, referred to as
“the best looking girls in the conference hall”, who ultimately capture the writer’s attention amid pomposity and extravagance of those assembled. Yet he wrote a dispatch, “Woman Takes Crumbs”, in which he comments that “women have little part in the Genoa Conference”, citing specific examples of skilled and professional women in the various delegations and using the nouns “woman/women” throughout, only once falling into cliché: “the clerical forces of nearly all the delegations consist largely of the gentler sex”. Hemingway also used, as was customary, the noun “girl” with an adjective or as an appositive to indicate or differentiate the gender of a person being named; hence, he refers to “a cash girl”, “shop girls”, and “a girl reporter”. And in keeping with the connotation of “maid-servant”, he often refers to waitresses as “girls”, a usage he pays particular attention to in stories such as “Hills Like White Elephants” and “Homage to Switzerland”, where the fusing of the connotations of “Miss”, “maid-servant” and “prostitute” is insisted on by the male characters.

Michael Reynolds has noted that Hemingway applied various techniques later employed in “his best fiction” in many of his early articles, and that as early as 1921 he was repeating a phrase to establish a particular tone. He was also experimenting with the ways in which he could refer to people, usually with a single noun, as means of establishing the truth. In his early journalism, and later in his fiction, Hemingway used the repetition of a noun for ironic underscoring, repeating the noun “ladies” to refer to the Toronto socialites he derided for their bloodthirsty enthusiasm at a local prizefight. In one biting piece, he referred to “a dark haired woman. . .was an American singer”, repeating the noun “singer” in each subsequent reference to point to her inability to sing. This technique he would use with greater emphasis in “A Canary for One”, in the reference to ‘the American lady”, and in “The Butterfly and the Tank”, in references to “the forceful girl”.

Hemingway’s artistic use of the nouns “girls”, “woman”, and “wife” fit contemporary experiments with colloquial language in 1920s’ Paris. Richard Bridman, in The Colloquial Style in America, maintains that the task of “imposing aesthetic distinction in meaning of a word had been lost in prose…”. Hemingway became a word by word writer. It did matter, then, that a “wife” would suddenly be referred to as “a girl”; that a married woman was referred to as “his wife” in a story, rather than by name; that a pregnant woman would be referred to almost exclusively as “the girl” or as in “Out of Season”, that a man could claim a relationship, “my daughter”, that the narrator will then undermine: “the girl”.

That Hemingway precisely defined a given character by such specific reference can been seen in two draft examples in which he commented on such references as he was writing them. Much later in his career in a typescript version of Across the River and into the Trees, Hemingway wrote the following sentences, which have Colonel Cantwell thinking: “Keep your temper, boy he told himself. But he was not a boy. He was fifty and a Colonel of infantry in the Army…In a typescript of a bench reading version of “The Sea Change”, which bears Hemingway’s proof reading marks, pencil additions, and initials. Hemingway did not correct the one speech tag that refers to the female character as “girl” rather than “woman”. He read carefully, noting all spacing errors, changing a word, and adding two full sentences for the narrator to speak, yet his eyes glossed over this reference to the “girl” of his story, so accustomed was he to thinking of her as of needing her to be “girl”.
Hemingway began to use such nouns carefully in the first story “Out of Season” he wrote after losing his early manuscripts and relied on the technique throughout what Paul Smith has called his “miraculous years of early fiction” as well as later in his career. In one short story with a female character that survived the theft of his manuscripts, “Up in Michigan”, Hemingway did not use the technique. It is clear, however, from the now available manuscript fragment and drafts of the short stories, that Hemingway did not merely “retain” most of this material, especially the nouns with which he referred to his female characters: the initial reference to the main female characters and any subsequent, subtle changes appear in the fluent early drafts. Since so little revision pertains to the nouns which refer to a main character, this purposeful use may well have been a technical aspect of the stories that Hemingway had figured out before he sat down to write. The references, then, are not only “retained”, but highlighted by the revisions around them. This “protection” of the emphasis on the nouns that refer to the women in these stories is clearly apparent in the draft revisions of his work.

These stories are filled with Hemingway women. “Homage to Switzerland”, with its repetitions of “girl”, “waitress”, “Mademoiselle”, “Signorina” and “Fraulein”, offers the most complex treatment of “girl” as “waitress”. Women in relationships are also “girls”, female characters whose sexual identity and maturity is not recognized or acknowledged by another important character, usually a partner, as seen in “Cat in the Rain”. “Hills Like White Elephants”, and “A Canary for One”, where the “American lady” refers to her grown daughter as “my little girl”. And women are relentlessly wives, as in “Cat in the Rain”, “The doctor and the Doctors Wife”, and “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber”. Often, these women are never given proper names, individual identities.

Critics have commented most often on one sequence of shifting references, those to the woman in “Cat in the Rain”, a story chronicling a Wife’s dawning realization of her loneliness within marriage and her discovery and articulation of the causes of that loneliness. At the beginning of the story, the woman is referred to as “the American Wife”, the fact that she is married being emphasized. She is consistently referred to as “wife”, “Signora” or “she”. However, as soon as she discovers that the cat has vanished, she is referred to as “the American girl” indicating that through this loss she has suffered a diminution. Never once are we given her name: clearly this women has no mature sexual identity of her own, what little she does have being bound solely of the husbands as the possessive pronoun “his” in the repetition of “his wife” shows. The temporary shift to the noun “girl” in this story stands out starkly for us today, given the narrower acceptability of the term “girl”, but it was then a subtle signifier of the troubled identity of this woman within her marriage.

Hemingway makes a telling correction, changing the word girl to “maid” in the following sentence: “It was the maid who looked after their room”. Hemingway would easily have written “girl” for “maid”, the connotation of “maid-servant” being natural to him. He knew, however, that the dramatic shift from “wife” to “girl” in the story had to be protected in order to retain its impact. Hence the change to “maid” in this seemingly unimportant reference. The draft version of “Hills Like White Elephants” reveals similar deletions and additions. In this story, the woman is introduced as “the girl” who is with “the American” man and is referred to mainly as “girl” as “lig” and “she”. The references to her as “girl” remain static, as does the man’s view of her, her pregnancy, and their relationship in general. In the draft, Hemingway once again revised the
references to another woman, the waitress, to keep the intended emphasis on the main character instance, naively unrealistic, making “girl” the more accurate and thematic.

Again, a waitress in colloquial terms could be a “girl” but here she cannot be so named without the distinction between the two “girls” becoming muddled and the emphasis on lig as a “girl” in the man’s eyes being diluted. Hemingway used a double cross out for the second “girl” reference, as if to emphasize that this character could not be the girl of the story. Through the revisions, the irony of the story is amplified: a waitress can be a “woman”, but the pregnant woman is a “girl”.

In this case, changing the introductory reference, given to us by the narrator, to the word “woman” gives us an accurate picture of the scene that the word “girl” would prevent: an adult female, not a child, has come to the house. The subsequent references to Maria as “girl” suggest her probable youth and the intimate nature of the relationship between the man and the woman: Maria is Enrique’s “girl”. In a separate, discarded fragment, Hemingway changed the sentence: “Come on Don’t be a silly bitch” to “Come on. Don’t be a silly girl”. Maria is not bitchy, but, in this instance, naively unrealistic, making “girl” the more accurate and thematically consistent choice.

In the first draft of “The Doctor and the Doctor’s wife”, Hemingway changed a reference to Dick Bulton’s wife, the Doctor saying: “Well Dick owes me a lot of money for pulling his squaw through pneumonia…For the tension in this story the possessive pronoun affords, no other use of the noun “wife” can appear in the passage—Hemingway needs the word “squaw” to keep the wives distinct and the repetitions of the words “his wife” working at an exacting level.

From 1924 on Hemingway was precise about the way in which he referred to his female characters. In “Indian Camp”, for example, there is tension between what is actually happening, given to us by the narrator: what young Nick takes in; and Dr. Adam’s descriptions of the action to Nick. Hence, the narrator gives us “a young Indian woman…trying to have a baby”, the Doctor the detached and impersonal “this lady”, while Nick wonders innocently, using both the vocabulary his father gives him and his own accurate vision: “Do ladies always have such a hard time having babies?” and “Do many women [kill themselves]?”. All of these distinctions are present in the early drafts, fusing technique and theme.

In two later and longer stories, “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” and “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber”, Hemingway does not write about “girls”, but about two women, Helen and Margot, who have lived in complex, often hurtful marriages. Again, the careful employment of nouns and pronouns and their shifting use, even within a long narrative, is deliberate and thematically essential. In “Snows”, the nearly unnamed Helen is introduced as “the woman”, seemingly free of all bonds and referred to by Harry as “this woman”, inviting, as he does with the use of the demonstrative pronoun, a comparison with “others”. Helen is never referred to as “wife”, but as “a damned nice woman” and “a fine woman” as Harry’s detachment from her becomes increasingly and painfully more apparent.

In “Macomber”, the much maligned Margot Macomber is keenly, though subtly, referred to. In fact, for all her perceived bitchiness, she is most often referred to in terms that bind her to her
husband: she is overwhelmingly “Mrs. Macomber” “his wife”, or “she”, with “Mrs” or “wife” as the referential meaning of the pronoun. This is especially true when she is introduced and in the section leading to Macomber’s death. At her husband’s death, Margot becomes, like Helen, “the woman”, with no title, no possessive pronoun, no proper name from which to gain the identity she has so intricately constructed for herself. Despite Hemingway’s customary “decoy” explications, this is, finally, also the tragic story of the very married Margot Macomber. While Hemingway often used the noun “girl” to refer to a female character whose sexual identity is not recognized or acknowledged by another important character, he also used the noun on a more complex level, one he naturally would write about in the 1930s in subtle, even covert ways: sexual orientation, role-playing, and role reversal. In the far-from subtle “Mr. and Mrs. Elliot”, Mrs. Elliot is happy once her “girl friend” has arrived from America. In “The Sea Change”, and later in The Garden of Eden, Hemingway wrote of characters who experiment with homosexuality and role reversal and speak about it in terms of “being a boy” and “being a girl”.

In “The Sea Change” the woman’s “girlishness” or bisexuality, is the issue central to Phil’s dilemma. As Warren Bennett suggests in his thorough article once Phil has accepted the truth about his own life, that the woman he loves is a “girl” and that he has been, as Bennet puts it, “his girl”, he acknowledges his partner’s true sexual identity. Referred to until this point in the story as “the girl”, the unnamed woman is then free to leave and the direct references to her as the “girl” cease. That the relationship between the man and the woman in “The Sea Change” is confused at best, “perverse” in Phil’s terms, and possibly something akin to incestuous, was on Hemingway’s mind when he wrote the story. A manuscript fragment shows that at one point Hemingway saw the two as siblings. They were a brother and sister who lived together and loved each other very much this was considered admirable in the old days.

In The Garden of Eden, Hemingway writes of Catherine and David: “Most people thought they were brother and sister until they said they were married”. In another parallel, in Across the River and into the Trees, Cantwell says to Renata, “I love you, devil, and you’re my daughter too”. Renata, consistently referred as “the girl” in the novel, later says, “I am only a child…” and “I want to be like you. Can I be like you a little tonight?”. With the noun “daughter”, one Hemingway used in life to refer to women he was fond of, as well as in his fiction, Hemingway varied the incest theme and further complicated the sexual atmosphere of this novel. Much of the sexual ambiguity and complexity of these works is contained in the seemingly simple term the narrators use for the men’s lovers: “girl”.

Finally, Hemingway’s use of the noun “girl” and the fact of the several unnamed female characters in the stories, have created a dilemma for critics. Hemingway himself referred to many of his characters as “girls”. In his letters he wrote about Liz Coats of “Up in Michigan”, Brett Ashley of The Sun Also Rises, Maria of For Whom the Bell Tolls, Helen Gordon of To Have and Have Not, and Renata of Across the River and into the Trees, as “girl”. Hemingway didn’t stretch believability, however: Pilar was “the Pilar woman”. Because the references to the women in most of these works are no fluid, so precarious, critics have either ignored the deeper implications of the references to them or devised a strategy to signal that the “girl” is, indeed, a woman: “the tragic figure in ‘Cat in the Rain’ is the girl, the ‘wife’, or ‘the man’s girl”’. Writing about “Hills like White Elephants”, Pamela Smiley consistently relies on the proper noun “jig” leaving the “girl” reference to work within the realm of the story.
Critics must take care to refer to the female characters in Hemingway’s work by name or as “woman” when warranted so that the implications of his references are not lost. To do otherwise is to diminish the purposeful interplay of the common nouns Hemingway used so often to refer to these women. As Hemingway’s nameless women, unclaimed or ironically claimed wives, and the “girls” who inhabit his fiction demonstrate, such references in Hemingway’s stories are never casual and have everything to do with revealing the dilemmas in which these women find themselves. Not acknowledge this technical achievement is to ignore the women’s stories and to miss that Hemingway wrote about their lives in a sensitive though subtle way.

REFERENCES


