

HEMINGWAY AND GENDER: BIOGRAPHY REVISITED

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This article reviews a number of biographies on Hemingway with the aim of revisiting the issue of gender and its relationship to life writing. Since biography has been defined as the best arena in which to fight unexamined assumptions and prejudiced notions, postmodernist biographical research into Hemingway has invariably pursued the explosion of the myth of masculinity by asserting that the writer's gender identity, the source of his psychological conflicts, was androgynous. Androgyny, a key word in gender-bending, implies the negation of a watertight system of binaries. Biography has thus not only pioneered the disruption of the writer as an icon of monolithic masculinity and allowed literary criticism to read his texts as containing a plurality of crosscutting gender identities. By using Hemingway as a case example, it has also been pivotal in helping us overcome the rigidity and inconsistencies of the dual system.

KEY WORDS: Hemingway, biography, gender roles, androgyny, postmodernism.

“He’s got that woman beside him so nobody will notice he’s a fairy” (Hemingway apropos of Cyril Connelly)

“Which reminded me of some gossip at the expense of Mr. Hemingway passed along to me in a taxi . . . Listen to this, he says, about the big bully boy of American letters . . . the implication was the same about Mr. Hemingway that was being put forward by Mr. Hemingway about Mr. Connelly—good God, they can’t *all* [sic] be fairies, can they, and if they can, what is a fairy, and what is the point of it, and what is the gossip supposed to prove?” (Saroyan 1978: 3)

In one of the articles of the gay serial publication *The Advocate*, “Hemingway’s son Gloria” (Quittner 2001), we are informed that, in 1995, Gregory, the novelist’s youngest son, underwent a sex change and adopted a new name—Gloria—after having married four wives and fathering eight children. Athletic, muscular, a keen fisherman, and an accomplished doctor, he decided to become a transgender in his early sixties because he had always struggled, his eldest daughter asserts, with his gender identity. Gregory’s life story echoes some of the thorny questions posed by his father’s conflicting personality. From Kenneth Lynn’s 1987 provocative account of the writer’s androgynous experiences, biographies on Hemingway, fueled by the postmodernist tenet that any system of domination must be destabilized, have largely contributed to the demise of patriarchal values and the ideal of heteronormativity epitomized by the novelist. The goal has always been to demonstrate the following principle: gender binaries—masculine and feminine—

are cultural categories which must be denaturalized. Hemingway was presumably interested in recovering, or looked back with nostalgia on, long gone or debilitated values, and this necessarily involved reinstating the strict Victorian gender division. Yet both his childhood experiences—the roles enacted by his parents—and the world that emerged after World War I openly contradicted what the young artist desperately believed to be an infallible principle. The modern age Hemingway woke up to one morning simply validated Marx's old conviction that "all that is solid melts in the air" (qtd. in Tallack 1991: 15). Gender roles as God-given and Darwin-selected categories, characterized by a set of invariable natural attitudes, were inevitably the first to crumble.

This new view of Hemingway's literature has been partly propelled by the publication of the posthumous novel *The Garden of Eden* in 1986, and by the subsequent quantity of revisionist biographical literature on Hemingway. Given that biographies have been defined as "miners' canaries on guard against the obnoxious air of outmoded schemata and unexamined assumptions" (Hoberman 1987: 204), the purpose of this article is twofold:

(a) First, we intend to see to what extent life writing has contributed to shaping our ideas on gender politics by presenting a writer ridiculously obsessed about his manliness. By analyzing Hemingway's life and fiction from this standpoint we can see how the conventional gender dichotomy (either X or Y without any intermediate zone) produces cultural schizophrenia. The traditional system based upon the opposition masculine/feminine only reinforces stereotypes and favors a dominant/dominated dualism.

(b) Second, postmodernist studies have converted Hemingway into one of the cultural/pedagogical targets to undermine monolithic masculinity and subvert its hegemony. We know that the postmodernist approach to knowledge is subversive of any regime of truth: every work with a hegemonic bias—patriarchy, racism, imperialism, etc.—must be revealed (Stanner 1991: 400–01). Hemingway, the writer who most unambiguously "gave us male definitions of manhood to ponder" (Spilka 1999: 29), has to be buried in order to resurrect a new writer whose gender identity can be used to unmask patriarchy. As Barlowe points out (2000: 148), Hemingway has become "a valuable site for studying the contested, fraught, and interesting late nineteenth century and twentieth century history of gender in the United States."

It has been often asserted that biographies play a key role in helping a nation understand itself and its identity. Casper (1999) has demonstrated the double-edged relationship of biographies to history: on the one hand, they may reinforce dominant values by presenting to readers individuals whose life and character must be imitated, i.e. by telling nationals how they must conduct their lives. Not surprisingly, biography has been defined as one of the instruments which a prevailing culture uses "to reinforce its own values and structures" (Novarr 1986: 154). On the other, it can also divert the readers' attention to marginal, neglected people whose lives may question and jeopardize establishment values.

It will be useful at this point to distinguish two models of biography:

(i) The traditional one, by definition a Protestant genre: it rewrites the Calvinist struggle between free will and predestination. Around these two extremes, the subject's life is recreated to show how after a series of struggles, detours and delays, fate—vouchsafed by God—is inevitably fulfilled (Abzug 1986: 21–25). The function is didactic: the reader, looking for certainty, finds a moral response in a fixed set of values.

(ii) The modern biography based upon psychology, which debunks the hero and

highlights his/her flaws. More emphasis is laid not on the protagonist's social/public life (his/her achievements) but on private/domestic aspects which reveal "contradictions the subject would have never discussed" (Casper 1999: 324). The ideological function is no longer didactic, for everything is thrown into question, thus losing any trace of a definite social purpose.

However, we might well add to the list a new biographical model shaped by postmodernist concerns. What is at stake now is not to destroy the subject's mythical status but to use him/her as a case study in order to revise dogmatic principles and unexamined values, and to denaturalize long-standing beliefs. In a way, the purpose is didactic but we are by no means returning to the nineteenth century moral lesson of hero-worship. Didacticism here has to be understood in a Brechtian sense: to make readers look at ideological questions afresh, in a detached way, so that they can explode unshakable assumptions related to power relations and gender roles. The subject's biography becomes, then, the litmus test to unmask the arbitrariness, contradictions, and contingency of cultural conventions, which are now deflated through the narration of the celebrity's life. Since a genre is "its use-value" (Beebee 1994: 14), the new objective of biography is therefore more directly political insofar as it dispels the illusion of erroneous beliefs and forces readers to reconsider what they had always judged as foregone conclusions.

It is evident that Hemingway wrought a self-image as the he-man of American letters, the writer who created an exclusively male preserve—athletes, prize fighters, sportsmen, killers—a world of "men without women," where outdated models of heroism, though extinct in a highly industrialized country, were still incessantly sought and worshipped: "Hemingway is the modern primitive . . . the frontiersman of the loins, heart and biceps, the stoic Red Indian minus traditions, scornful of the past, bare of sentimentality, catching the muscular life in a plain and muscular prose" (Fadiman 1977: 126). This image of male identity, which faithfully reproduced all the stereotypical traits assigned to the gender role, automatically granted Hemingway a niche in American patriarchy. In the forties and fifties, the decades during which homosexuality was diagnosed as a psychological disorder latent in a high proportion of citizens (Sinfield 1999: 212–19), the novelist was hailed as the embodiment of manliness which Americans needed in order to recover the lost confidence in traditional values. In a way, Hemingway demonstrated that it was possible to be a writer and "a full-size man," despite some critics' nagging suspicions (Eastman 1977: 131). Since postmodernist criticism knows that gender roles are cultural constructs that one is taught and trained to perform, the first critical strategy was to see to what extent the novelist articulated the male code he never stopped celebrating, and to reveal the contradictions which stemmed from the rigidity of gender binaries.

In "A Natural History of the Dead" (*Complete Short Stories* 335–41), a deceitfully impersonal account of the war atrocities through a naturalist's detached attitude, the protagonist is shocked to discover that among the bodies of dead men there were also dead women. The bodies are not naked so their anatomy cannot reveal their sex. Moreover, they are identically dressed in the workers' overalls. Without their women's apparel, the bodies only retain physical differences, but these are not sufficiently conspicuous or do not catch the reporter's eye. Gender-based clues have fled to the wings and only biological differences are onstage, but for some reason they prove insufficient, or fail to be glaring enough, to signal the unbreachable chasm between men and women. The young ambulance driver does not so much as glimpse any unmistakably female traits. When he realizes, however,

that there are also women included in the heap of dead bodies, the thing that really astonishes him is to see that many of them do not have long hair so their heads look like those of boys. "In those days women had not yet commenced to wear their hair cut short, as they did later for several years in Europe and America, and the most disturbing thing, perhaps because it was the most unaccustomed, was the presence, and even more disturbing, the occasional absence of this long hair" (*Complete Short Stories* 336). We know that women factory workers—mainly those employed in munition plants—began to wear their hair short for purely hygienic reasons: the powder stuck easily to long hair. Thus, one of the most traditional gender and culture-dictated attributes of femininity—long hair—is absent, and one is left in the dark, groping for a fixed defining feature of womanhood, but with nothing to grasp. The young volunteer has been carrying dead bodies to the improvised mortuary without noticing some of them were women for the sole reason that they had short hair. Gender has stopped being an immovable set of values and begins to be permeated by fluidity.

Obviously this realization leaves the observer with a contradictory flux of fears and longings. If gender is a changing cultural construct, nothing remains stable, and the whole array of attributes which draw the line between masculine and feminine gets suspended or canceled. Either we have to look at ourselves in the mirror to search for new values which revalidate our gender identity so as to overcome the feeling of emptiness caused by the temporary cancelation of the binaries, or we can choose to break down the dichotomy masculine/feminine with the aim of denaturalizing gender. Hemingway seems to be ideologically trapped in this dilemma: on the one hand, his fear of losing stability made him yearn for a world in which normative gender binaries were automatically reinscribed, that is, men and women were to be genitalized again. Women must wear long hair, be affective mothers and wives, and remain indoors; men, in turn, must defend and protect them, and be brave and stalwart fighters. The growing masculinization of women which the outbreak of the First World War brought to the Western World (women incorporated into the labor market caused the gradual obliteration of gender-based signs of traditional feminine identity: hair, dress, behavior, etc.) can only entail a parallel process tinged with no less imminent dangers: the emasculation of men. The tragic result is a modern world dominated by the inversion of gender roles and, therefore, the most widespread malady of modernity is none other than sterility. Women cannot beget children either because they do not find suitable partners to mate with or because they do not want to, thus unfulfilling what heretofore seemed to be an inevitable biological law. And, unfortunately for Hemingway, men are also losing a part of their virility as this is a value no longer in demand by strong, empowered women who have decided to fulfill their roles by themselves in a new regendered society. As Michael Reynolds notes, Oak Park, the hometown which became a synonym of morality and traditional values, "remains beneath the surface, invisible and inviolate [in his narrative]. It was his first world, the world he lost, not to the war, but to modern times" (1986: 5).

Hemingway's childhood has proven to be of paramount importance in order to raise gender-related questions. "Beginnings carry meanings" (Abzug 1986: 21), the rule of thumb of biography, became doubly important in the case of Hemingway. Did the writer's upbringing fit into stereotypical gender training? That was the key question that led to many other no less important questions.

Hemingway biographies

Linda Wagner-Martin (2000) has summarized the critical evolution of the novelist's work throughout the twentieth century. She points out that the dominant critical school in the forties—New Criticism—imposed the subjugation of all literary genres to the supremacy of poetic language. Narrative was to be shaped by the concurrence of formal devices in order to endow the text with a myriad of symbolic/mythological meanings. Hemingway's style—simple, laconic, minimalist, repellent of any rhetorical figure and superfluous adjectives—hardly fitted into the canonical model of literature. Without the trappings of conventional literary techniques and built upon the subtleties of the iceberg principle (the essential meaning always remaining underwater), Hemingway's language gave critics little or nothing to analyze. Thematically, Wagner-Martin also tells us, Americans were more “in need of reassurance” (2000: 7), and the novelist's recurrent themes only insisted upon loneliness, sterility, loss and emptiness.

In the fifties, Hemingway was still timidly admitted into the course syllabi. His short stories began to be class staples but his novels continued to be left out. During the sixties, Faulkner or Fitzgerald, but not Hemingway, took up most of the critical attention. Yet this situation began to change after the writer's death, when *A Moveable Feast* (1964) and Carlos Baker's seminal biography (1969) were published. Interest in Hemingway's language economy and structural patterns, and analyses of the “hero code” and other philosophical concerns gradually gave way to considerations of gender and sex roles (Wagner-Martin 2000: 12), which reached their highest point in 1989 with the publication of Mark Spilka's *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny*, a critical work largely based upon Lynn's literary biography (1987). Before reaching this point, however, the work of many biographers paved the way.

Carlos Baker's *The Writer as an Artist* (1952) aimed to demonstrate that beneath the writer's prosaic, hard-boiled language there lay a well-crafted structure of non-literary symbols. Hemingway's style was dual: on the one hand, he was a naturalistic reporter and a faithful observer of reality; on the other, he managed to build a subtle network of symbols which only those endowed with acute perception were able to retrieve. Ambivalence, cryptic meanings concealed though a deceitful prosaic appearance, the suppression of easy sentimentalism in order to suggest emotions through realistic images, all of this made Hemingway's craft not “an art of the surface,” as Wyndham Lewis once called it, but one of the finest examples of “the double perception principle.” Subjective and objective became blended. In other words, the Ruskinian ideal and Eliot's objective correlative theory reached its perfection in Hemingway's work (Baker 1952: 58–62).

This principle of duality, i.e. the notion that two opposed principles are reunited, is a pervasive idea in the biographies and literary criticism on the writer. The hero's crippled body is only a symptom of his silenced psychological conflicts: courage becomes, Norman Mailer believed, the most visible mark of the writer's deep-rooted anxiety (qtd. in Meyers 1985: 571). The iceberg principle insists on the idea of a wealth of meanings concealed below the surface; fiction becomes a mask to hide the persona and true feelings (“he was in reality so susceptible to emotion that he strove constantly for the elimination of himself, his thoughts and feelings” [H. E. Bates, qtd. in Meyers 139]). Baker solves this tension of opposites by simply defining Hemingway as a man of contradictions, “complex and many-sided,” “shy and braggart,” “sentimentalist and bully,” “an ethical hedonist” and by

contrast, the man who was terribly scared of “that vast cosmic nothingness which Goya named Nada” (VII–VIII).

Baker’s classic biography - one in which documentation prevails over interpretation - was completed before the opening of the writer’s posthumous papers in 1975 and the housing of the collection at the Kennedy Library, Boston in 1980. Accordingly, a controversial work such as *The Garden of Eden*, not published until 1986, or problematic stories like “The Last Good Country” could not be discussed by the biographer, and it is logical that cross-dressing, inversion of sexual roles, or erotic fantasies are barely mentioned. Baker dedicates a mere 37 of the 564 pages to the novelist’s childhood and adolescent years, and eschews any interpretation which could give a fixed pattern to the mosaic of the subject’s life. In his own words, “[t]his is not a thesis biography,” for no single element “dominates his psychological outlook and fully explains the nature and direction of his career” (xi). Yet he is the first to tell us that Ernest and his older sister Marcelline were dressed alike—pink gingham dresses and flower-ornamented hats—during the boy’s first months, and that the child was given dolls to play with, but he hastens to add that as early as 1900 (when he was barely one year-old!) “he began to assert his boyhood . . . in an environment ideally suited to manly endeavors” (3). The last trace of troubling femininity—the long hair or the Dutch-boy haircut his mother adored—was abandoned when he entered first grade, i.e. at the age of six.

Certainly we move closer to interpretation with Jeffrey Meyers’s *Hemingway: A Biography* (1985). Meyers explains Grace Hemingway’s determination to have her children appear as twins as the direct consequence of the Victorian era’s fashion to dress boys in girls’ clothing, but he apprises us that Ernest was dressed in lace-trimmed dresses until three, a fact that Lynn (1987: 38–40) will later demonstrate to be statistically unusual: only twenty per cent of boys in the age group between one and two remained indistinguishable from little girls; after the age of two, the percentage was five per cent or less. Ernest’s education did not therefore fit into the average American family’s formula but into his mother’s peculiar twinning of her children. Meyers soon identifies the clash between the two stereotypical gender roles Ernest grows up with: on the one hand, Ed, the father, a natural-born hunter, woodsman and sportsman brought up in the manly tradition of Teddy Roosevelt; on the other, Grace, the mother, the sensitive artist, the opera singer whose career was partly sacrificed for the sake of rearing her children. Yet the conflict between both personalities soon explodes. Ed is nervous, weak, cowardly and insecure. He makes less money than his wife, likes cooking, is unable to impose his criteria on home affairs and is barely allowed to make any important decision. Much to the contrary, Grace is firm, strong, daring and domineering. Meyers interprets this inversion of the gender roles as the driving force of Ernest’s conflicting personality. As he later identified himself with his father—who also committed suicide—and saw his mother as the root of evil, he associated Grace’s world with a destructive, emasculating power. As a result, he equated art and culture “with the aesthetes of the 1890s, with homosexuals and with sissified music pupils of his mother” (17). The only way to escape from this castrating influence was to suppress “the sensitive side of his nature” and to assert his masculinity through the resurrection of the father’s image: “He wrote about the Indians and violence of Michigan, rather than the stuffy culture of Oak Park, because he wished to remember and recreate his father’s world” (17).

Two years after the publication of Meyers’s work, Kenneth Lynn (1987) picks out

Grace's twinning designs not only as the basis of Hemingway's major emotional conflict but also as the leitmotif of his fiction. Lynn thoroughly analyzes Grace's obsession to convert Ernest into a girl and later Marcelline into a boy as the means of healing the wounds inflicted upon her as a girl competing with her brother during her childhood, and as a way of putting an end to gender-based discrimination. The Hemingway myth- the indisputable masculine life- is exploded, for his outbursts of manliness were only a sign of the anxiety he felt in relation to the gender role he was expected to fulfill. "Caught between his mother's wish to conceal his masculinity and her eagerness to encourage it, was it any wonder that he was anxious and insecure?" (41). These early experiences of looking like a girl and feeling like a boy became "the fountainhead of his fascination with the ambiguities of feminine identity" (322) and his contradictory attitude—utter rejection and unquenched curiosity—towards male homosexuals.

Lynn never uses the word "androgyny" but he provides a detailed analysis of the conflicting gender identities of Hemingway and his characters. The word is first used in Mark Spilka's study (1989). Hemingway spent his life quarreling with his androgynous nature, i.e. with "devilish and adoring female versions of himself" (3), which he tried to repress and mostly disguise beneath his constant displays of virility. Only through the exchange of sexual identities could he recover the female side of his identity which was the source of happiness during his childhood, and thus heal the androgynous wound (13). Spilka argues that Hemingway found a series of typified male attitudes in the Victorian ideal of Christian manliness he learned during his adolescent education: virtue was achieved through "separation from women, love of sport and animals, ability to withstand pain . . . religious devotion and . . . mighty action" (21). The gallery of fictional characters Ernest and his contemporaries were expected to imitate ran from John Halifax to Lord Fauntleroy, the American boy who became a fairy prince, educated and charming, the repository of good manners and affectation. Grace attempted to inculcate this effeminate model in Ernest, who desperately clung to his father's frontier heroes exemplified by Huckleberry Finn or Pawnee Bill. Spilka also sees Hemingway as embodying a crisis of maleness in twentieth century America: the end of the conquest of the West, the disappearance of the frontier and genocide of Native Americans made violence and belligerence unjustified and male behaviors outdated in an ever-growing urbane landscape (63).

In the light of Spilka's findings, Nancey Coles and Robert Scholes (1994) suggest alternative ways of reading the Hemingway text by focusing our attention on the question of gender, a lifelong, "conscious preoccupation" (ix) for the writer in order to include him in the postmodernist canon and silence the feminist critics' attacks on the novelist. Masculinity is undermined by isolating traditionally overlooked thematic concerns which now, not surprisingly, include androgynous forms, like the ones appearing in Greco's paintings (119), homosexual bullfighters (122) and masculine women (145). In 1999 Debra Modellmog pushes the argument further by vindicating her desire to assert Hemingway's homosexuality: "I am not positing a gay Hemingway . . . although surely my Hemingway is gayer and queerer than most Hemingways" (4). She argues that the desires of the critics play a fundamental role in the interpretation of the writer's works and in the construction of his image. In the case of Hemingway, the need to safeguard his masculinity has given way to a critical position which favors so abstract a term as androgyny. Androgyny, Modellmog holds, "neutralizes any sexual component of Hemingway's upbringing" (32)

and suppresses the possibility that the writer may have harbored any homosexual desire. Thus, the threatening overtones of homosexuality are obliterated for “the homosexual exists” whereas “the androgyne is nothing more, or less, than an idea” (32). Yet, in my opinion, Modellmog ignores the fact that androgyny is also a theoretical concept that may help us overcome the gender binaries by creating an overlapping category that breaks up the polarity. Furthermore, androgyny is a term closely related to gender-bending. Starting from Esther Newton’s definition of gender-bending as consisting of anything useful “to wrench the sex roles loose from that which supposedly determines them, that is, genital sex,” Alan Sinfield sees cross-dressing, camp and many other androgynous strategies (in the Hemingway text, hair bleaching, hennaing and gender role-playing could also be listed) as politically subversive, for they direct a guerrilla attack on the whole system of male and female roles and reveal the artificiality of their trappings (1994: 199). In using androgyny in connection with Hemingway, the masculine icon par excellence, the intention of his critics and biographers is neither to do a perfect hatchet job on his virility nor to undervalue the homosexual overtones of his prose. Their major goal is to display the contradictions of a rigid gender training which divides female and male into exclusive identities, for identity categories are “instruments of regulatory regimes” (Butler 1991: 13). Androgyny implies by definition the indeterminacy of gender ascription and, therefore, the fluidity of values and practices which cannot be nailed down in a dual system but enfold, as Butler holds, a plurality of identities. Heterosexual and homosexual are not, Gore Vidal tells us, personality types but terms that refer to sexual practices. They are adjectives that define not people but acts (110). Hemingway’s conflicting gender roles—either those embodied by his active, emasculating mother and his weakling father, or else the model embodied by Fauntleroy—hardly fit into the traditional gender system, for they never fulfill what is expected of them.

Whether he read Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies* or not, the point is that Hemingway held an ambivalent attitude towards bygone stereotypes: nostalgia for the deteriorated male code—a combination of courage and physical strength—and the superannuated female image—fragility and sensitivity—, and at the same time a direct rejection of both models insofar as they could not easily be accommodated to the demands and pressures of his time. Ruskin’s influential essay proves interesting for it condenses the most commonly ascribed traits and behaviors of genders from a patriarchal perspective, but, oddly enough, it also shows the contradictions of the dualism. Ruskin’s desperate need to redefine the sex roles—mostly the female—clearly reveals the inability of the traditional gender system to meet the requirements of the modern world. Thus, he hastens to discard the alleged superiority of men over women (144) and underlines their complementary nature. He also denies the subservient function of women as “the shadow and attendant image of her lord, owing him a thoughtless and servile obedience” (124). Yet he does not hesitate to see man as the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the conqueror and the defender. A man’s energy is his watchword and his function is to rule. On the contrary, women are still given domestic functions which nevertheless have a public projection. They must guide men and secure “the order, comfort and loveliness” of their world. Without their aid, men cannot tackle its defense, maintenance and progress. Women must also study in order to gain knowledge, but in their case it must primarily be an emotionally guided and socially oriented knowledge, not a collection of cold, objective data without any social use, for they must feel pity for “all who are desolate and oppressed” (174). Undoubtedly, Grace and Ed

overturned Ruskin's gender types for if Grace hardly spent time doing household chores and was constantly taking all major and minor decisions with or without her husband's consent, Ed was far from being the daring, active man ready to accept any challenge that came his way.

Whereas Ruskin still depends on stereotypes in his redefinition of gender roles, Havelock Ellis's work certainly disrupts the rigidity of the binaries by focusing his attention on a wide range of sexual practices which run from "eonism" (cross-dressing) to homosexuality. There is ample evidence that Hemingway read Ellis's books as early as 1919 when he was only 20 (Lynn 1987: 114; Reynolds 1998: 120; Eby 1999: 198). Ellis discusses topics that certainly captivated the young novelist's imagination and left an indelible mark on his fiction. Ellis looks into agricultural life and nature to discover the analogical basis of many sexual images. Rain, urine and semen share a unique origin (Ellis 1906: 387, 389), an idea that must have been lurking behind the writing of a story like "Cat in the Rain." Surprisingly, Ellis narrates an episode of a young married American woman who managed to appease her intense longing for a child by going out in the rain and getting totally soaked (389).

"The Last Good Country," an unfinished story published in 1972, eleven years after the author's death, includes androgynous motifs. The story, which "gets very close to barely sublimated incest" (Rubin 1977: 483), is based upon an incident that took place in the summer of 1915, when Ernest was 16 years-old and Sunny, his favorite sister, 10. In an attempt to emulate the father's hunting prowess and impress his admiring sister, the young boy shoots a large blue heron dead, an illegal action which makes him wrap it up in a newspaper and leave it on the boat. When he returns, the game warden's son has discovered the bird and asks Ernest whether he has killed it. The boy makes up the story that a stranger has given it to him, and both he and his sister return home and tell their mother what has happened. Next day, the game warden himself, a rough man with very bad manners, turns up on the farm. He demands to see the law-offender. Grace's answer is immediate: she "ordered him off the property" "in her most imperious way," while she asked Ursula to bring her a shotgun (Baker 1969: 20-21). Baker holds that the incident had some special significance for it "bulked in [Ernest's] memory" (21) over the years. Instead of being praised for the action his father boasted of, he was ostracized by the family and punished by being made to work on the farm the Hemingways had on Longfield, an island across the lake, until the incident was forgotten.

Meyers (1985: 15) insists on the strong sense of rivalry the son felt towards the father. Hunting, the defining paternal activity, could only produce negative consequences for the son. Ernest resorts to Uncle George, asking for his protection. Instead, the latter disapproves of his action and urges Ed to punish his son severely. Ed accuses Ernest of cowardice for not being able to confront his mistakes and go to court.

Lynn (1987: 55-56) compares the biographical episode with the plot lines of "The Last Good Country" and highlights the major differences between them with the aim of finding out the psychological meaning underlying the changes. First, the mother's role is substantially modified in the story. Unlike Grace, the fictional mother does not defy the menacing-looking wardens but gives them lunch and supper. This is hardly surprising, Lynn argues, if we bear in mind Hemingway's hatred of the maternal figure. Secondly, the heron has been transformed into a buck deer, and Nick flees into a virgin wilderness, an Edenic place, "the last good country." He does not escape alone as he did in real life: he is

accompanied by Littless, the young sister, who, Lynn (56–57) believes, was modeled not on Sunny but on Ursula, the sister who committed suicide in 1966, and both leave behind civilization and its rules—the world of “the others”—while they are chased by the Evans boy. During their escape they become incestuous, or this is the message we are invited to read in the young girl’s fantasies. Littless, who dreams of becoming Mrs. Nick Adams and living in Cross Village, Michigan (*Complete Short Stories* 537), cuts her hair off and becomes “like a wild boy of Borneo.” “I’m your sister but I’m a boy, too” (531). Lynn classifies the story as further evidence of Hemingway’s “drama of sexual confusion” (58) whereby the blurring of gender traits between siblings was the main source of the writer’s increasing anxiety about his gender status. Along these lines, Eby (1999: 28–30) suggests interpreting the story as the seminal expression of Hemingway’s fetishistic fantasies: the girl’s tonsorial experiments anticipate the erotic fascination with the androgynous nature of Littless who becomes both a sister and a brother.

Yet the story does not easily yield to a one-sided interpretation on the basis of Hemingway’s complex perversions. Its symbolic reverberations are all too evident to remain unnoticed even on a cursory reading. Nick has killed a buck deer or stag—a clear sacrificial victim—precisely on the twelfth of the month (525), a number with no less clear symbolic undertones, for it evokes the coming of winter. In other words, he is assuming the role of Apollo, and Littless might well incarnate Artemis, the god’s sister who “was created from an original androgynous figure (or perhaps were twins)” (Bailey 1997: 99). This might reinforce the presence of androgynous references which are scattered throughout the story. Thus, we might also interpret it as a straightforward nature myth story. Nick, like Apollo, has killed Orion who dies as a stag in the autumn before the coming of rains so that his blood invigorates the earth. The siblings reactivate the fertility cycle and after killing the stag they can do nothing other than return to an Edenic place (“The Last Good Country”) where spring and life always rule and winter is never seen, away from evil and the (Ev)ans boy. The new paradise they find knows no sex division and one has the freedom and innocence to overcome the imposed gender dualism by rearranging the masculine and feminine components in a new gender identity. Yet Nick and Littless’s dream to evade gender restrictions proves to be impossible from the outset. The world they seek is, as much as the Indian place and lifestyle they attempt to perpetuate, lost, for “in their minds at least they can never escape ‘civilized’ law” (Eby 1999: 30) and gender roles. Indians left the land long ago (541), and the undefiled forests merge into timber camps now and then. What is left for them to do is to seek refuge not in nature but in fiction. *Wuthering Heights*, a novel about the impossibility of an ideal love, is Nick’s choice reading at bedtime, and it clearly reveals the futility of the children’s adventure. The siblings’ strong bond parallels Catherine and Heathcliff’s tormented love. Nothing better could mirror the children’s retreat from conventional establishment values than the lovers’ escape to the moor and their farewell to society and its “godly ways.” Yet the conclusion of Hemingway’s story, like the ending of the classical novel, seems to deny the possibility of building a safe retreat away from the real world’s oppressive laws.

Whether or not the story may be open to biographical or mythical interpretations, the point is that the blurring of gender binaries continue to dominate its thematic development. Since hunting, a man’s occupation, is not rewarded anymore but severely punished, and the mother’s duty to protect her child is not performed, for she becomes a perfect hostess to the game wardens, it is not surprising that the children are disillusioned

with the parental roles, as they fail to provide a model they can imitate. The solution is the escape from the responsibilities of the adults' world and the burdens of the gender system. Yet although Nick's actions initially intend to reinscribe man's traditional duties—he must be the daring hunter and the constant provider of food—he cannot in the end fulfill them: he is panic-stricken and refuses to go for the berries, for the very idea of leaving the shelter of trees and walking up to the creek makes him feel exposed to the Evans boy.

To conclude, reading the Hemingway text in the light of the postmodernist approach initiated by biographical studies raises many fascinating questions and sometimes provides a wealth of answers. From them we learn that Hemingway, the man, was certainly a victim of the blatant inconsistencies of gender dualism, and many of these contradictions seep back into his texts. Even as this American writer was one of the first to denounce the inevitable absurdities of war, his short stories and novels also turn the tables on watertight gender categories. Thus, his narrative opens the window on a new ideological horizon which favors values and practices at odds with oppressive heterosexual normativity. What comes to the fore throughout his short stories and novels is a gallery of characters whose behavior blurs, transforms, questions, or puts a new perspective on gender: overtly gay (the bartender in "The Light of the World") and lesbian characters, closeted homosexuals ("Out of Season," "The Butler"), transvestites (*The Garden of Eden*), dephallused males (Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*), women dressed as men and guys adopting feminine features, men without sexual appetite and, in contrast, man-eaters (Brett in *The Sun*), perpetually unsatisfied in the quest for a non-existing macho male. The multitude of possibilities opened up by a "gender-bending" analysis of Hemingway's life and works turns this traditionally most "misogynist" of men into a decidedly post-modern modernist writer. If the test of good literature is the ability to challenge, resist, and incite new critical approaches, certainly the new biographers of Ernest Hemingway demand that his oeuvre be reevaluated yet again.

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