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Symbolic Aborticide Behind Productivity: Hemingway and Female Sterility

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Ernest Hemingway, sometimes affectionately called “Papa Hemingway,” remains as one of the most well-known, popular writers that the United States has produced. Though his stature in the American literary cannon is stable, what makes him quite different from other canonized American writers is probably his huge “popularity” among the people both inside and outside of the U. S., attracting even those who are not quite “literature” major. There is even an annual event called “the Hemingway’s look-alike contest” allegedly held by the Foundation “Hemingway Days,” Key West in Florida. For those who study his works seriously, this kind of event might sound too casual. Yet such worldliness too, serves as a firm evidence for Hemingway’s prominence.

Indeed, Hemingway’s popularity once subsided, when early feminist studies introduced new readings related to Hemingway’s description of fictional females, which the precedent male critics had overlooked before. These feminists’ attacks were so influential that Hemingway’s work or related studies were once reduced in high school and university classrooms (Sanderson 171). But his once diminished popularity has revived recently, especially in the field of gender study where early feminist criticism is now being reconsidered and renewed. Whether they approve or disapprove of Hemingway’s gender perspectives, that Hemingway’s gender studies still proliferate is significant; it shows that his fictional females –

though sometimes they are considered flat characters – offer a variety of readings, provoking many gender topics yet to be discussed.

The present paper concerns Hemingway's three major novels – *The Sun Also Rises*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *A Farewell to Arms* – and one famous novella *The Old Man and the Sea*, each of which seems to involve female sterility at the core of the heterosexual male-female relationship in the narrative structure. By “sterility” I mean both mental and physical condition, which refuse harvesting products on the female side. To be more specific, within the works mentioned above, there seems to be an apparent plot-pattern in which the female characters are deprived of productivity; and this “female sterility” is what I would like to raise as one of the peculiarities that Hemingway's description of gender is engaged in. By reading these works in terms of female sterility, hopefully I would like to draw a conclusion that Hemingway's woman characters are represented as sexually passive and biologically sterile for the purpose of retaining and reinforcing both Hemingway's and his male characters' dominance and leadership. In other words, Hemingway tends to create his female characters' sterility in such ways that he can take advantage of the male-dominant power-relationship within his world.

Let us consider *The Sun Also Rises* as a starter. This novel is often interpreted as a story of sterility projected by the male protagonist Jake Burn's physical impotence attributed to his war experience. The reader recognizes his frustration expanding as he faces the beloved woman Brett's love affairs repeatedly and conspicuously shown in the story. Nevertheless, noteworthy is the fact that promiscuous as she is, Brett also suffers from trauma and is incapable of having a healthy

sexual relationship with any men surrounding her; while other male characters, such as Mike, Robert, Romero, are imposing vigorous desire toward her. Jake is irritated because he cannot get hold of Brett the way others do.

While Jake's sterility has drawn considerable attention of the reader, what is likely to be neglected is Brett's sterility, not only as a matter of mentality, but also of her physical condition. Indeed, critics have often noted Brett's trauma traced from the past as a spiritually sterile element which somewhat contributes to the barren tone of the novel as a whole. On the other hand, they tend to overlook her possibility of essential infertility – that is, her physical reproductive inability, whose oddness should naturally have drawn the reader's attention if he or she focused on her whorish attitude emphasized in the novel. Surprisingly, Brett's possible infertility is never mentioned, nor given any explanation in the text. Whatever she does with several men, it will not end up with her getting pregnant; nor it will cause her to beware of her physical condition. The reader cannot help, therefore, but attribute this unnatural silence on her part to the author Hemingway's intention which seems to take it for granted that she is made sterile not only mentally but also biologically from the beginning.

Along with her possible physical sterility implied in the text, aging is another sterile element that Brett has to face. However promiscuous she behaves before Jake, Brett knows well that she is already decaying as a suitable partner when she faces Romero, the young man with full of hope for the future ahead. She can be his mother, but not by any means play a role of a wife to provide him with children. Brett herself notices their age gap also when she says "I'm thirty four, you know. I'm not going to be one of these bitches that ruins

children" (202) – though the statement could also mean Brett's preference to avoid a sexual relationship requiring certain kind of obligations or restraints like the one Romero offers. At any rate, as a surrogate mother to Romero, naturally Brett cannot marry him, even if he has allegedly expressed certain willingness toward marriage: "He really wanted to marry me. So I couldn't go away from him" (202).

Contrasted to Brett's downward mobility both in flesh and spirit is Jake's revival of energy and recovery of appetite, which becomes apparent when he goes to rescue her in Madrid. During lunch time Jake has a big meal while Brett eats little; Jake acts positively toward the future ('I like to do a lot of things') while Brett is all in despair with her loss of Romero (205). After these conversations it is Jake who takes charge of the entire situation. He decides what to do, where to go, and even sends for a taxi: "I tipped him [the waiter] and told the driver where to drive. . . (206)". Once a neutralized steer he may have been, Jake now takes the place of Romero in looking after her, as the active word "drive" suggests.

It is likely that Hemingway needed to make Brett sterile if he were to emphasize and to give affirmative view toward the male characters' sexual drive as a symbol of masculinity. In this respect, the woman's sterility can be part of his clever and convenient plot so as to avoid inevitable results of her getting pregnant, a bothersome complex from which the male-dominant plot gets damaged entirely. After all, we do not encounter Brett's having Mike's, nor Romero's child. If we did, her child would not so much have lessened conviction of her mental suffering, as have marred the hero Jake's craving for Brett, for whom he sets his ultimate goal so as to restore his masculinity.

Female sterility can also provide a good excuse for a man to justify his sexual desire readily fulfilled under the name of "love". Consider *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. When Fiedler noted in 1960 that in this novel "Hemingway has written the most absurd love scene in the history of the American novel" (304), apparently he did not need to wait for the coming feminists' attacks on Hemingway's gender bias. As Fiedler correctly points out, the romantic elements in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* fail to appeal to the reader chiefly because there is never enough time allowed for Robert and Maria (they have only three days) to accomplish their love romance. Thus, the reader might well receive the impression that their affairs exist only in favor of Robert, whose sexual appetite is conveniently satisfied by Maria's presence. Possibly to avoid giving such readings, Hemingway sets a seemingly persuasive excuse on Maria's side, and this is implied in her biological invalidity of child-reproduction.

It must be noted that Hemingway describes Robert as a man with considerable thoughtfulness and responsibility – at least on the surface – in dealing with Maria. After the couple spend their first night together, Robert reveals his anxiety over Maria's possible pregnancy: "What if she has a baby?" (95). But his anxiety is soon to vanish when Maria, two days later, confides him during their pillow talk that "It is possible that [she] can never bear either a son or a daughter" (378) since she was not impregnated during the disastrous rape she had gone through. Yet, like any typical "good" girls wishing to become a mother, Maria still looks forward to having Robert's children when she says, 'I would like to bear thy son and thy daughter. . . . And how can the world be made better if there are no children of us who fight against the fascists?' (378). Maria's willingness to provide Robert with his sons

and daughters who will carry out Robert's mission makes her an ideal mother-woman with total commitment to her lover, often found in the nineteenth century's sentimental family novels. And it is to this "old-fashioned" good girl that Robert offers a makeshift marriage proposal: 'We are married, now. I marry thee now. Thou art my wife' (378).

To Robert and also to Hemingway however, it is only her submissive attitude, not her reproductive function that counts. When Maria declines Robert's marriage proposal owing to her physical condition, Robert declares that her possible infertility "is no importance" to him (378), an encouraging statement that has enough power to make the woman accept his proposal eventually. This kind of setting, we must admit, is well provided by the author Hemingway in terms of the story's "neat" ending. Having the poor heroine speak her own sterile condition in advance, Hemingway eventually manages to legitimize the hero's short-lived and therefore seemingly irresponsible sexual involvement with the young girl. By this tactful plot, Robert leaves nothing problematic behind when he faces his death in the end. Instead, we are told that the couple eventually succeed in "having now" and even fulfill unity so that "there is no other one but one now" (406). Whatever ideal meanings Hemingway wishes to give to their three-day romance, at least one thing is obvious and it is that their love affairs are designed on the assumption that they do not result in the heroine's childbearing as a sign of her productivity. After all, Maria is presented for Robert, merely as "the author's gift to his surrogate [Robert], enabling him to experience perfect, (and, of course, doomed) love" (Comley and Scholes 50).

Pilar is another woman in this novel who is deprived of her productivity not necessarily in the biological term, but rather, in the field of creative writing.¹ For owing to her illiteracy,

Pilar is initially made not to record her experiences in any textual form were it not for Robert's help. Listening to her garrulous talk, Robert wishes that she "could only write. He would try to write it and if he had luck and could remember it perhaps he could get it down as she told it. God, how she could tell a story" (145). Robert's sympathetic regret over Pilar's illiteracy can be conversed into Hemingway's victory at the very moment when his surrogate hero mentions it. As Sanderson acutely points out: "One imagines Hemingway winking at the reader: 'Look how *I* can *write* a story,' he seems to say. Pilar's artistic, oracular dimension links her to the author himself. . ." (188). Like Maria's deprived biological productivity used to legitimize the plot's ending, Pilar's disabled creativity in the field of story-telling is also well taken advantage of by her creator Hemingway for the sake of creating *his* work.

Biologically productive and sexually active is Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*, whose pregnancy, however, invites tragic miscarriage as well as her death in the end. Critics such as Comley and Scholes regard the scene of miscarriage as a firm evidence that Hemingway perceived women's childbearing with sympathetic understanding. They state: "The scenes of childbirth in Hemingway's writing are vivid testimony to his sense of the price women paid in becoming mothers. He saw childbirth as a wretched exercise, fraught with pain and possibly resulting in death" (74). Although there is no denying that Hemingway's description of Catherine's labor scene indeed shows outstanding meticulousness, when it comes to Hemingway's sympathy toward women "becoming mothers," these critics' view seems a little one-sided. The reader must remember that the inevitability of her suffering itself was originally caused by her lover Frederic — if not

entirely. To cite Fetterley's acute remark, "Catherine never questions Frederic's responsibility for her situation; she seems to operate on the tacit assumption *that conception, like contraception, is her doing*" (70 italics added). Examining the possible contraceptive devices available in "the educated Western World" around the World War I, Reynolds also concludes: "that Frederic apparently left the problem to her says a lot about male lack of responsibility at that time" (122). If, as Fetterley and Reynolds argue, Frederic is partly responsible for Catherine's pregnancy, the reader must also question the author Hemingway's plot-making in which the heroine is destined to suffer. In short, as long as Catherine's pregnancy is concerned, its aftermath requires more critical examination considering how it functions, and also how it benefits and influences the entire plot.

From one point of view, it is possible to say that Hemingway might have taken advantage of Catherine's tragedy as a major sterile event at the climax scene in two ways. First, her death is definitely effective in adding more tragic elements to the text as a war novel. Second, luckily for the hero Frederic, Catherine's fruitless labor eventually leaves no complication behind, including the war baby "young Catherine" who could have suggested a further development of the story if he were to survive. The fetus is destined to die from the beginning, if temporarily functions as a source of the couple's unity. To put it another way, their baby, in the guise of a product of love, ironically functions as "a time bomb" sewn and then grown in Catherine's womb, only to explode in the end. During Catherine's pregnancy her doctor says she is "rather narrow in the hips" and therefore they should "keep young Catherine small" (261). The doctor's caution worries Frederic, already anticipating at this moment that her womb is

to burst unless she receives the caesarean operation, which, however, invites fatal hemorrhage for the mother. The evidence clearly shows that Catherine's womb also embodies sterility, just like Brett's or Maria's does; only its execution is prolonged till the very end.

Still, one could guess Catherine's final sterility in advance with the help of several hints and foreshadowing provided by the author throughout the novel. To examine them, it will be the best to go back to the point before the discovery of Catherine's pregnancy, where marriage issue begins to concern the couple. When Hemingway deals with a male-female love relationship, the couple's talk over "marriage" often becomes inevitable. In *The Sun Also Rises*, even the short-lasting couple like Romero and Brett discuss marital issue, as has been quoted. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* also introduces Robert's proposal (though unrealistic) to Maria. Noteworthy is that in these two cases it is the man who at first suggests that they should marry. The woman on the other hand, though made happy by the man's offer, usually declines the lover's proposal for the sake of *him*, not of *her*. This male-dominant pattern clearly appears in either Brett's or Maria's statements previously quoted. The topic of marriage is also discussed in *A Farewell to Arms* where Frederic makes a seemingly heroic comment to justify his relationship with Catherine; "I wanted us to be married really because I worried about having a child if I thought about it" (103). But Frederic, unlike Robert, is too honest to end his declaration just there. Only two sentences later, he actually admits: "... and I suppose I enjoyed not being married really" (103). The reader might take this inconsistency merely as the young man's wish to stay in an ideal paradise, avoiding reality. Yet soon the story comes to a point, where we begin to suspect that their marriage might

not be designed from the beginning by the author. The couple's conversation often lacks in reality even after Catherine's pregnancy is discovered. For example when they talk about their respective relatives they are reluctant to introduce their fathers to each other:

'Have you a father?'

'Yes,' said Catherine. 'He has gout. You won't ever have to meet him. Haven't you a father?'

'No,' I said. 'A step-father.'

'Will I like him?'

'You won't have to meet him.' (139)

If they are reluctant to "get married really," naturally they do not appreciate the child's birth either. Frederic asks Catherine if she feels "trapped," and her reply is "[m]aybe a little" (125). Such conversation intrigues the reader because of its directness and cruelty. There is not any future-oriented implication found here. Their negative attitude toward the baby exceeds in degree as the story proceeds. Catherine's initially reserved comment "trapped a little" is later replaced with more frank utterance across the lake. As Catherine rows the boat, Frederic tells her to "watch out" so that the oar does not hit her on the stomach. Then she answers, "[i]f it did. . . life might be much simpler" (245). Hence, childbirth never becomes a welcome matter for the couple through to the end. It is "the price [which Catherine pays] for sleeping together"; the child is "the by-product of good nights in Milan" (283).

If their child only deserves to be called "by-product," one must remember that the true "product" Frederic obtains after the loss of Catherine is his memoir — that is, the entire text he has narrated. And the memoir then automatically becomes a work to be published by Hemingway, the omniscient narrator. Significantly, while putting emphasis on the negative aspects

of love affairs during the war time – wasted lives, cruelty, and sterility – the author has completed the work which stands both as a war novel and a tragic love romance.

It is ironical that women's sterility provides a major source of Hemingway's writing topic, and therefore contributes to his vigorous and ceaseless productivity as a novel writer. After all, it is not too much to say that his works are completed at the sacrifice of sterile wombs which obediently keep satisfying men's desire. This plot structure is explicit in a literal sense in the three novels discussed above, where each female character plays a major role as the male protagonist's counterpart. By contrast, Hemingway's later novella *The Old Man and the Sea* excludes women figures from the text almost entirely, perhaps except for Santiago's wife now in a picture-frame who is mentioned only once, and a female tourist who incautiously overlooks the old man's hidden accomplishment. Referring to Spilka's view, Sanderson states that Hemingway, by embodying "the critics' hostility toward his work in a female figure... feminized the things that hurt his career" (191). Sanderson is probably correct. Hemingway certainly found vent for his hostile feelings in degrading female figures. Reading the novella from this point of view, one may find, besides the woman tourist, another feminized figure whose sterility again reflects Hemingway's secret ambition to achieve mastery over the degraded womanhood.

If there is any visible image of woman in the text, it is metaphorically represented by the sea, which "the old man always thought of... as feminine and as something that gave or withheld great favours" (23). And from this sea, Santiago makes an attempt to extract a fish, one of the sea "products." In this respect the triangle relationship between the old man,

the sea, and the fish somewhat resembles to the battle between Frederic and Catherine in which the dead fetus served as a symbolic sterility to demonstrate the man's winning the game in the end. Indeed, the feminized yet uncontrollable sea never collapses as Catherine does, but what takes place of the sea in this case is the fish which plays two roles: first, as the old man's female counterpart; second, as the awarded trophy to display his masculinity.

Although the fish is always addressed as "he," the old man's affection for it resembles to the heterosexual relationship quite typical in Hemingway's world. Santiago tells the fish repeatedly "I love you and respect you very much" (45). It is because he "loves" and "respects" the fish that the old man has to conquer it to prove his mastery. In the following extract one can read sexual connotation in the old man's battle with the fish:

The old man... lifted the harpoon as high as he could and *drove* it down with all his strength... He felt the iron go in and he leaned on it and *drove* it further and then pushed all his weight after it. (80 italics added)

As the word "drive" indicated the recovered power of masculinity for Jake in *The Sun Also Rises*, the harpoon Santiago "drives" here also functions as a phallus whose virile power has now regained: he is old, but not yet impotent. In other words, the act of killing the fish sufficiently proves the old man's masculinity still at work.

On the other hand, if the reader focuses on the fish's side, the story could almost read like an allegory of a woman who suffers from sterility or aborticide for the sake of the man's virility. After the harpoon's invasion the fish bleeds as though a woman after sexual penetration: "[t]he shaft of the harpoon

was projecting at an angle from the fish's shoulder and the sea was discolouring with the red of the blood from his heart" (81). It is this bleeding which results in the fish's eventual sterility, as the smell of the blood invites sharks to exploit its fruitful flesh entirely. The only thing the fish manages to leave is "the long backbone. . . now just garbage waiting to go out with the tide" (109). Its role as the old man's prey and partner having ended, the unwanted fish must go, as "garbage."

The old man has failed to profit anything valuable by the fish; but at least its bone and its size stand as firm evidence that proves his regained fame as a fisherman. More importantly, when the work was completed, it really helped to regain another "old man" Hemingway's fame, as well as to contribute to his winning the Nobel Prize in 1953.

Having reviewed several works of Hemingway, the reader eventually notices two things which are commonly seen among them. First, masculinity most often holds power in his world; women's sterility is its price. From the "strong" woman Brett to the feminized sea, from the adult Catherine to the girlish Maria, they are all presented in the text so as to help the men to revive, or strengthen their virility; while their own sterility is never to be rewarded. Second, as well as to benefit the male protagonists, female sterility serves as an important plot-providing device, boosting the author Hemingway's productivity ironically. It may be said then, that Hemingway has often operated aborticide on his female characters in his texts to control the timing when to start or terminate the male-female relationship in his plot.

Hemingway's calculated aborticide is not at all a surprising measure to take, when the reader recalls his well-known mother-phobic tendency. As Maria wins eternal girlhood by

remaining infertile, Hemingway possibly wished to exclude mother-women when dealing with love romances. Or, it can also be said that his operation on women's aborticide is a secret revenge against his mother he could execute within his fictional world.

Notes

1. Pilar's physical infertility is also implied in the text, if not evidently. While she explains how "death" smells like in Chapter 19, she asks Rafael, "Hast thou ever seen a *gitana* who was not about to have, or just to have had, a child?" Rafael then answers, "Thou." Pilar does not deny what was said; instead, she talks back to him, changing topics.

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