



Anti-feminism in Ernest Hemingway's "a very short story"

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ABSTRACT

Ernest Hemingway, writer of 20th century America, winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, has a reputation of misogyny. A negative outlook towards women showcases his most famous works in which a sense of masculine dominance is almost ever-present. He often employs a sarcastic tone in his treatment of female characters. In his fiction, women who in literature are generally deemed subjects of heartbreak are ironically portrayed as heartbreakers or portents of destruction, in the least. This attitude towards women, we believe, is manifested in his "A Very Short Story" from his first short story collection *In Our Time*. Taking a biographical approach, we draw on his early experiences with his mother and his first love to better understand the story under study. But what has until now escaped notice is that "A Very Short Story" can also be read as a reaction to Feminism. To substantiate this claim, we put forth a brief survey of the Feminist discourse during the years he published "A Very Short Story", and offer signs of anti-Feminism from the text.

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Introduction

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"A Very Short Story" is the story of an American soldier, who badly injured during World War I is attended to by a nurse called Luz. The relationship between patient and nurse eventually develops into a love affair which does not last after they are departed. The male protagonist of the story is informed by a letter from Luz that she intends to marry a major soon, and that their relationship had been only "a boy and girl affair." In the end, it's told that Luz never gets married to the major, while the protagonist contracts gonorrhea from a sales girl.

"A Very Short Story" is believed to reflect a specific event in Hemingway's life during World War I. In July 1918, after being seriously wounded by mortar fire and spending five days at a field hospital he was transferred to the Red Cross hospital in Milan where he met Agnes von Kurowsky. Agnes, a tall dark-haired nurse whose lively spirits seemed to light up the whole atmosphere of the hospital, engaged the deepest interests of young Ernest who immediately fell madly in love with her. Notwithstanding Hemingway's heroic stature which had made

him an agreeable case for every woman (he had rescued an Italian soldier despite his many wounds), Agnes was purportedly resistant to his advances at first, due to 7 years of age gap between the pair, and therefore their affair never passed the kissing stage. But by the time he was released they had intended to marry within a few months. However, after sometime, Hemingway received a letter from Agnes, writing she had become engaged to an Italian officer. With this, his ideals of love for women turned into dust. The effect of this ensuing disillusionment brought about by the unconsummated love for Agnes left such indelible a mark on Hemingway's life that he devoted one of his greatest novels *A Farewell to Arms* to the subject, but an earlier and a less idealized account of the event can be found in "A Very Short Story" whose female character according to Oldsey (1974) was named Ag at first.

This event might have contributed to fixate the role of woman as betrayer in Hemingway's mindset, but it was his tumultuous feelings towards his mother that provided the grounds for future misogynistic liabilities. Regarding Grace Hemingway, Raeburn (1989) writes, "[She] was responsible for [Hemingway's] undiminishing preoccupation with sexual identity and gender distinction, which made his behavior at times a caricature of masculine aggressiveness..." (208). She has been described to be an affectionate mother whose nurturance was nothing less than unrestrained. That resulted in his son's unreasonably excessive reliance on her as a child. Moreover, She had the peculiar habit of dressing him in female clothing during his childhood. An older Hemingway reacted to this unorthodox upbringing by putting on a deliberately masculine and chauvinistic persona, shunning the androgynous dependent image of his early years. This persona marks his most important works, and a detached unromantic tone demonstrated in "A Very Short Story" is evidence.

Furthermore, Grace Hemingway, being a musician, in her son's eyes, represented a rising class of independent women, and her monopoly in the household and dominance over her husband became a source of fear for Hemingway, later in his life. He

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dreaded the fate of his father whom he thought to be inappropriately subservient. In "A Very Short Story" this fear clearly finds voice. The narrative opens on the backdrop of a roof on which a view of "chimney swifts in the sky" is visible. Whether read on a symbolic level and interpreted as phallic, or on a realistic level and seen as a symptom of an industrialized society, this image indicates a man's man's man's world. It is in this setting (in which Luz occupies the traditionally feminine profession of a nurse) that the love between the protagonist and Luz blossoms. Later in the story, however, this male-dominated world seems to be jeopardized by the emergence of a more active class of women, epitomized in Luz's bold intentions to open a hospital. This female independence with its undertones of Feminism appears to be the very reason the love between the two characters comes to an end.

The onset of the 20th century saw the fruition of Feminists' many attempts at the Women's Suffrage Movement which sought to extend the right to vote to women. The abolition of the disenfranchisement of women took many years to materialize, and it was 1920's passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution that finally made it happen. It is of no small importance that another milestone in the Women's Suffrage Movement coincided with the events which inspired "A Very Short Story": In 1918 the British Parliament extended the vote to include women householders, householders' wives, and female university graduates over the age of 30.

In the succeeding decade, after their demands for equal civil rights had been met, Feminists began to question social attitudes towards women, by defying codes of womanly social behavior. These codes of behavior, they believed, were unjustly defined by men, and disregarded women's capability of judgment. The search for a female autonomous identity, which culminated during 1960s and 1970s in a second wave of Feminism, endangered the pillars of an established patriarchal society whose belief system, some Feminist writers assumed, were implanted in people's minds through arts and literature. Naturally men reacted to this movement, and they did so through literature once again.

Seen in this light, Ernest Hemingway's highly masculine fiction is a strong response to the emasculating principles of Feminism, as it is a reaction to either his mother's nurturing him or Agnes' disloyalty to him. Therefore, his views on women can be called anti-feministic, as well as misogynistic, and his portrayal of the female character in "A Very Short Story" is a testament: Luz leaves the male protagonist in despair; the sales girl (who is mentioned briefly only to specify the cause of the

disease) with gonorrhoea – one with emotional pain, another with physical. Also, the narration, though objective, is very sarcastic in tone when relating Luz's Dear John letter. Her endeavors to vindicate herself, talking about things "he would probably not be able to understand" are nonsensical at best. Her lack of restraint when met with sexual advances ("It was lonely and rainy there,..., Living in the muddy, rainy town in the winter, the major of the battalion made love to Luz, and she had never known Italians before...") almost reminds one of Brett Ashley from *The Sun Also Rises*. Finally, as Pfeiffer (2001) suggests, the word "expect" in the clause "she expected, absolutely unexpectedly", when read as a pun, can imply unexpected pregnancy (hence the reason of the unexpected marriage.) This is a feasible assumption if the Iceberg Theory is taken into account, and is, therefore, another step Hemingway takes to degrade his female character.

All of these instances from "A Very Short Story" attests to Hemingway's hostility towards women, also exhibited in his more well-known works. The story reflects the after-effects of his bitter experience with women, and, therefore, can be read as a key for better understanding his many future failed encounters with women, such as his four marriages. Most importantly, this short story is a showcase of men's attempts to renew a world well lost.

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