



Feminist Sensibility in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

Ji Junjun^{[a],*}

^[a]Associate Professor, International College, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China.

* Corresponding author.

Received 2 May 2021; accepted 4 July 2021

Published online 26 August 2021

Abstract

This paper exposes that in the novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway presents his feminist sensibility by establishing a reciprocal male-female relationship from three perspectives, namely, Female Individuality in Maria, Female Subjectivity in Maria and Reciprocity between Maria and Jordan.

Key words: Feminist sensibility; *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; Reciprocal relationship

Ji, J. J. (2021). Feminist Sensibility in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 23(1), 64-67. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/12239>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12239>

INTRODUCTION

When we talk about Hemingway, we talk about tough guys. Masculinity is always made an issue in Hemingway's writing career. In 1940 Edmund Wilson, who admired Hemingway in his early career, was one of the first to criticize his "growing antagonism to women" (Wilson, 1985, p.3). Some critics even acclaim that Hemingway couldn't depict women or that he was better at depicting men without women (Fielder 86). With the rise of the women's movement in the 1960s, Hemingway became even more the target frequently attacked by feminist critics. These attacks, however, led to a broader reevaluation of his work. The resulting rereading's have given visibility to Hemingway's female characters and

have revealed his own sensitivity to gender issues, thus casting doubts on the old assumption that his writings were one-sidedly masculine.

In this article, I am going to prove that Hemingway reveals feminist sensibility in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. To put it more specifically, Hemingway presents a reciprocal and complementary male-female relationship rather than the "dull convention in which the men are all dominance and knowledge, the women all essential innocence and responsive passion" (Mayers, 1983, p.336).

1. FEMALE INDIVIDUALITY IN MARIA

To some feminist critics, Maria seems the classic stereotype of the marginalized women and "the fantasized dream maiden whose infantilized dependency and submissive eroticism caters to all that feminists find most representable -in the male gaze" (Brenner, 1992, p.131). She is considered as an object with a face, with a name, and with a body, but without any individuality. Roger Whitlow even provides a persuasive explanation about Maria's submissiveness and her devotion to love: Maria confronts both physically death at the hands of the Fascists and psychological death as a consequence of her brutal treatment (and is restored by the joint therapeutic efforts of Pillar and Robert Jordan). ... Maria finds a new sense of proportion about "essential things" which few who do not share that kind of trauma seem able to love other people, to give of self, to merge with others, represent life's "essential things" (Whitlow, 1984, p.34)

In my opinion, however, Maria is not passive and submissive at all. She is a woman with strong individuality. Besides traditional virtues, such as nurturance, care, and compassion, she is a woman with self-determined action and critical consciousness. Her individuality is displayed in her strength to continue her life, her bravery in the battle, her dignity in face of death and her courage to

quest for love. In the process of her growing into adult, Maria displays bravery to continue to live on despite nightmares: her parents were shot dead in front of her eyes, she was raped without any mercy, her hair was cut short and she was locked into the prison. In the battle, Maria demonstrates her spirits of unyielding heroism. She carries a single-edged razor in the breast of her shirt so that she can take her own life rather than be captured by the enemy. Maria's individuality is also embodied in her quest for love. As Augustin says: "...Maria does not do this (sleep with Jordan) lightly" (p.291), Maria is not any man's woman until Jordan appears. When she meets Jordan, she knows she loves him and she is determined to pursue her happiness. What's more, she has the courage to tell Robert about the gang-rape she suffered, though Pillar suggests her not to do so. Her experiences are so terrible that Robert perceives her "going dead in his arms" when she first tries to tell him about them (p.71). When she finally tells Robert the details of her story, she clearly indicates that she was gang-raped (pp.350-53). From this we know that Maria is not passive at all. Instead, she is active as well as independent. She knows when to take initiatives and she knows what is right for her to do. She is a woman with self-determined action and critical consciousness.

It is Maria's female individuality that deeply impresses Jordan and arouses his admiration and love for her.

2. FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN MARIA

Maria is not only a woman with female individuality, but also a woman with female subjectivity. Her female subjectivity reveals in her role in caring for, nurturing, comforting and transforming Jordan.

At the beginning of the novel, Jordan is a duty-oriented cold hero who has never really loved or suffered, nor recognized his own share in the human grief and death. For the other characters, he is "comrade Joran" or the "Ingles." It is Maria who breaks through this formality to call him "Roberto". Until he meets Maria, Jordan has used his work, his knowledge, and his skepticism to protect him from an intimate relationship with women. It is Maria's trust and care that softens his shell of aloofness, freeing him from his enslavement to work, teaching him to relax, opening him to the magic of the body and initiating him into the realm of authentic emotional commitment. Maria's female concern for others has taught him throughout the story to care and expose him to the risk and pain of involvement with others. At last, Jordan forms an intimate and harmonious relationship with the partisans who have become closer to him than his own family.

Maria's influence on Jordan's personality is further shown in the change of his way of seeing and experiencing things. Previously, most of Jordan's behavior

has been governed by the cold reason of his head, and all of his thoughts have been directed toward a goal in the future—the blowing of the bridge—now he must live in the present. His entire life was controlled by purposes: to become a professor, to know Spain, to write a book, to win the war, now he begins to view life as a process rather than a purpose, a means rather than an end. Jordan realizes that future goals are mere abstractions and that the real existence is always the present:

And if there is not any such thing as a long time, nor the rest of your lives, nor from now on, but there is only now, why then now is the thing to praise and I am very happy with it. Now, agora, maintenance, heute. Now ... (p.152)

Therefore, even after learning of Pablo's betray and knowing the demolition of the bridge will be more dangerous with the the equipment stolen by Pablo, Jordan shows his growth by not allowing his preoccupation with work to interfere with his love, by not allowing the future to damage the present, but going on with his life, and by giving his himself to Maria before the impending danger. At this final experience of the ecstasy in love, the linear time of the American's watch, glowing in the dark, is overwhelmed by the existential time of love—"now and now and now" (p.334). During these four days, and three nights among the guerrillas, Jordan not only learns how to live so intensely in the present that the seventy hours is as full as a life of seventy years, but also comes to understand the beauty of giving and gaining by giving the importance of selflessness to those in love: "He knew himself was nothing...In the last few days he had learned that he himself, with another person, could be everything" (p.346).

When he tells Maria gratefully, "You taught me a lot, guapa" (p.335), he is also acknowledging the new perception and new insight he has gained from Maria, whose role as a mentor to her male counterpart is then self-evident.

It is the new perception and the new insight that make it possible for Jordan to achieve another more difficult kind of victory over himself in his acceptance of death, over the feeling of nada or emptiness, a break-through into a new realm of nature, the vast, profound world in the feminine vision opened to him by Maria—the body, the senses, love, night, friendship and self-knowledge. When Jordan sees Maria for the first time after the blowing up of the bridge, he embraces and holds her tightly, and the two separate lines of the story, the mission and the love, then merges into one. "Never has he known that he could feel emotion for a woman in the midst of battle. He no longer allows his work shut him off from the fullness of experience. A competent soldier when the novel begins, Jordan has become a complete man by the end—soldier, lover, comrade, friend" (Santon,1989, p.185).

It is Maria's love for Jordan that makes it possible for him to be a royal and noble man. The more Jordan

cherishes his love for Maria, the more he is determined to devote himself to his cause. In the ecstasy of love with Maria, Jordan realizes that life should be enjoyed, yet good exacts a price and this realization strengthens his faith that “you believe in Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. You believe in life, liberty and pursuit of happiness... You have put many things in abeyance to win a war. If this war is lost all of things are lost.” (p.269)

Since the cause promises to wipe out century-old oppressions so that man may be given a new life, it is worth fighting to the death for it. At last, Jordan, after his fatal wound, sacrifices his life for his cause, his love and his comrades. What Jordan offers in his sacrifice is his most noble of human ethic, the complete selflessness, which is constructed in the caring and nurturing power of the feminine world.

3. RECIPROCITY BETWEEN MARIA AND ROBERT

As for the love between Robert Jordan and Maria, there are many negative critics. Lionel Trilling states in “Partisan Review” that “By now the relationship between men and women in Hemingway’s novels has fixed itself into a rather dull conversation in which the men are dominance and knowledge, the women all essential innocence and responsive passion” (qtd. in Meyers, 1983, pp.335-336). Leslie Fielder gives the most pungent criticism that “in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* Hemingway has written the most absurd love scene in the history of the American novel” (p.86). A. Robert Lee notes that it is not really love between Jordan and Maria, because “the transaction goes all one way, towards fulfilling Jordan’s needs, not Maria’s his fantasy, not hers” (pp.93-94). However, Dorothy Parker praises Hemingway’s writing of the love affairs in this book, declaring, “nobody can write as Ernest Hemingway’s can of a man and a woman together, their completion and their fulfillment...nobody else can get such excitement upon a printed page” (qtd. in Dai, 2002, p.174). I cannot agree more with this statement. “The completion and fulfillment” fully proves the state of reciprocity established between Maria and Jordan.

The theme of reciprocity between two sexes as frequently made central in Hemingway’s fiction. As Sanderson states: “...an idea of attaining prelapsarian bliss by establishing a complementary union with a member of the opposite sex. The search for such a relationship runs throughout Hemingway’s fiction. In a sense, he writes variations, more or less developed, on a single fantasy: a man finds his ideal woman, and together they flee from civilization into some patrol retreat where they are united through their love against the threat of the world” (p.175). This reciprocity between the sexes, achieved in a natural setting remote from society, is well illustrated by the love between Jordan and Maria. Maria

who, in her role of daughter-listener, provides an attentive audience for the experienced Jordan and in turn teaches him to care and to expose himself to the risk and pain of involvement with others through her open feelings for him. Maria’s admirable virtues are enlarged into positive female figures who in their relationships with men return the longing for union and for mutual understanding through dialogue. “A relationship of mutual interdependence relates the hierarchies of domination as the model of relationship between men and women”.

On one hand, Robert helps to nurture Maria back to life. Maria is a war-victim, young and childlike. Having been gang-raped by the Fascists, she is more fragile than any of Hemingway’s other women and as she admits she was “dead in my head with numbness” (p.353), she is in need of protection and guidance. When Maria meets Jordan and falls in love with him, her wound caused by the inhuman Fascist is healed by Jordan’s love and she manages to regain her strength and her faith in life. “Robert Jordan, in his...role as lover...recovers the honor of ...the violated woman...” (Stanton, 1989, p.175). Jordan’s love and caring enables her to learn to enjoy life and live on with hope.

On the other hand, Maria shows Jordan a healing present in the natural world. With the reestablished ability to trust, she forms connections with the band, and especially with Jordan, and pass the desire for connection, healing, and responsibility to Jordan. As he realizes he is falling love with her, Jordan thinks, “Maria was very hard on his bigotry. So far she had not affected his resolution but he could prefer not to die” (p.164). Though still beholden to his sense of duty, Jordan loses the sense that he and those around him are instruments. As Maria teaches him to care, he sees for the first time something more than the isolationist “duty” he has lived for. He tells Maria, “I have learned much from thee” (p.380). Maria awakens Jordan’s need for connection and responsibility. Maria promises the possibility of healing. For the progress he makes, Maria becomes his guide. This fully demonstrates that instead of being “passive sex kittens”, “pin-up girls” or “perfect mistresses”, Maria is Jordan’s profound love, soul mate and spiritual guide.

Maria is the female principle that complements Jordan’s male nature; her qualities unite with his, and the idyllic love affair blossoms. Maria’s selfless emotional commitment to Jordan makes her absolutely identified with Jordan. She reiterated in different word that she and Jordan will be as “one animal of the forest and be so close that neither one can tell that one of us is one and not the other” (p.234). In describing their lovemaking, Hemingway mysteriously involves the cosmos. His incantatory verbal rendering of the sex act suggests a transcendental fusion of the couple with each other and with the universe: “for now always one now; one only (p.379). The book’s best known line—“And then the earth

moved” (p.160)—is Hemingway’s attempt to convey the significance and the rarity of true organic union between the sexes.

In the physical act of union, Maria gets into complete states of oneness with her lover. In losing his isolated self in Maria, Jordan gains eternal life beyond his insignificant morality. In the joining of the lovers’ bodies, the harmony of their wills, their contact with the Spanish earth and the high sky above and their simultaneous organism coalesce at a given moment to create the ecstasy, a transcendental fusion of the couple with each other and with the universe is obtained. For the first time in any of Hemingway’s novels, the characters have burst the boundaries of time and space to reach what Hemingway would call the “fifth dimension”. Through the rarity of true organic union between the male and the female, Maria and Jordan have achieved religious experience in the root sense of the world: they are bound to each other and to the world around them: “for now always one now; one only one, there is no other one but one now, one...one and one is one...” (p.334). It is mystic ecstasy for Maria and Jordan have found the faith both in him and in her. In his final good-bye to the weeping Maria, Jordan says: “we both go in there now,” “Thou are me too now, Thou are all there will be of me” (p.406). We hear the familiar resonance of Hemingway’s celebration of the “oneness” even in face of imminent death. By emerging one into the other, a perfect union and a sort of immortality are achieved.

Such repeated and strong emphasis on the “oneness”—the perfect harmony between the sexes—in the novel reveals that the relationship between man and woman is one of caring, of loving perceptions and of transformation rather than of domination. With the harmony between two sexes, human beings are connected to each other and are an interdependent whole, a unity that exists in and through its diversity. As a result, the view of self is expanded. As hinted in the novel, Maria may carry the seed of a child within her and life will go on and on, “All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.” Regardless of the success or failure of any individual or any generation, “the earth abideth forever” (Sanderson, 1996, p.192), and life is sustained.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, in the novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway presents his feminist sensibility by depicting a woman with female individuality and female subjectivity and presenting reciprocity between man and woman. To some extent, it is this feminist sensibility that helps create a better world. As a result, the earth ever-lasts and human life sustains.

REFERENCES

- Brenner, G. (1992). Once a Rabbit. Always? A feminist interview with Maria. In R. Sanderson (Ed.), *Blowing the bridge: Essays on Hemingway and For whom The Bell Tolls*. Greenwood Press.
- Daieguiyu (2002). *The female characters and their gender roles in Hemingway's fiction*. Guangzhou: Flower City Publishing House.
- Fielder, L. A. (1962). Men without women. In R. P. Weeks (Ed.), *Hemingway: A collection of critical essays*. Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Geismar, M. (1950). Ernest Hemingway: You could always come back. In John K. M. McCffery (Ed.), *Ernest Hemingway: The man and his work*. New York: Avon.
- McCffery, J. K. M. (Ed.) (1950). *Ernest Hemingway: The man and his work*. New York: Avon.
- Meyers, J. (Ed.) (1983). *Hemingway: The critical heritage*. London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Rutledge & Kegan Paul.
- Sanderson, R. (1996). Hemingway and gender history. In S. Donaldson (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Hemingway*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Stanton, E. F. (1989). *Hemingway and Spain: A pursuit*. The University of Washington Press.
- Wagner, L. (Ed.) (1974). The narrating of *For Whom The Bell Tolls*. In *Ernest Hemingway: Five decades of criticism*. Michigan State University Press.
- Whitlow, R. (1985). *Cassandra's daughters: The women in Hemingway*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood.
- Wilson, E. (1985). *Hemingway: Gauge of morale*. In H. Bloom (Ed.), *Ernest Hemingway*. Chelsea House Publishers.