

Resolving Tensions in *The Garden of Eden*: Determining Hemingway's Final Dilemma

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Abstract:

The concept of sex/gender as a binary set lies at the heart of *The Garden of Eden*, along with Hemingway's life-long fascination with the possibilities of shift in gender and with sex. The question of male identity and the crisis in masculinity seems to have been evolved into the broader question of gender identity and gender crisis. The significance of the theme of androgyny in *The Garden of Eden* lies in the fact that it accentuated the issue of sex, gender and sexuality not in one single novel to which it belonged; rather, the structure of the book echoes through and affects our general understanding of Hemingway's entire oeuvre. In this novel, the traditional masculine voice lying latent in Hemingway's psyche surfaces and functions in favor of the masculine authority. This has been part of the unresolved dilemma within Hemingway for long. He had stored it within him and has expressed it on various other occasions. The present paper undertakes to resolve the long-debated tension regarding Hemingway's gender dilemma in *The Garden of Eden*.

Keywords: Masculinity, Hemingway, Gender, The Garden of Eden, Identity

Introduction:

The posthumous publication of *The Garden of Eden* brought issues of gender and sexuality to the foreground and called into question the binaries that exist regarding the gender identity. It established once and for all, Hemingway as an author whose androgynous inclination is in stark contrast to the machismo image he has, knowingly or unknowingly, propagated throughout years of literary production. The significance of the theme of androgyny in *The Garden* was that it accentuated the issue of sex, gender and sexuality not in one single novel to which it belonged; rather, the structure of the book echoes through and affects our general understanding of Hemingway's entire

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oeuvre. While the former works of the majority of modernist and Hemingway's contemporary authors were concerned with the question of 'what makes a man a man?' the publication of *The Garden* changed that question into 'what makes a man a woman?' What makes a woman a woman? What makes a woman a *man*? What makes men and women heterosexuals? What makes them homosexuals? And what makes them bisexuals? Or simply put 'what is the importance of gender in our total make up as human beings? In *The Garden*, the question of androgyny is foregrounded and it functions, as it laid in the depth of Hemingway's mind, to remove the barrier between the sexes and annuls the conflicts and bargainings that have always been associated with male/female relationship.

Discussion:

As we know today, Hemingway has long been fascinated with the possibilities of gender transformation and with experimenting with sexual possibilities. In one of the most illuminating biographical sketches on what is called "the potentially generational Hemingway obsession with ambiguity", John Hemingway, Gregory Hemingway's son, unearths the long history of bipolar tendencies in his family shared by both his father and his grandfather. In his essay, John Hemingway sheds lights on topics such as androgyny, the union between the sexes, his father's life-long habit of cross-dressing and his grandfather's obsession with dying his hair. He asserts "if anything, *The Garden of Eden* could be viewed as a return to his artistic origins" (2012: 426). Few pages later he mentions that he "discovered from a letter that Ernest had written to Mary in 1948 where he describes how he "wants to be her girl" and how he tried to dye his hair blond to look the part" (429); the two themes that constantly reverberates in the lines of *The Garden*. From there, we are informed that Gregory continued to cross-dress throughout his teens, and soon after he was married in 1951 he was arrested when he tried to use the ladies' bathroom in a movie theater in Los Angeles. We also know that he finally underwent a surgical transsexual operation at the age of sixty-four to change his sex. In this essay, John Hemingway makes a short attempt to provide first-hand information and experiences of the roots of his father's life-long struggle with his conflict over the instability of identity. More importantly, his main goal is to unveil Hemingway's "other side", to refine his image as the symbol for the "American male virility" and the dominant false macho image that exists in literary circles and tell us about the tales which obviously contrasts with the popular image that people had of him.

The concept of sex/gender as a binary set lies at the heart of *The Garden*, along with Hemingway's life-long fascination with the

possibilities of shift in gender and with sex. The question of male identity and the crisis in masculinity seems to have been evolved into the broader question of gender identity and gender crisis. That David is a passive receiver of gender reassignments inscribed by Catherine, and that their sexual role change and their sexual transformation need no longer be coated by any outward heterosexual framework as it was in, for instance, *A Farewell To Arms*, is Hemingway's step forward to undermine the heteronormative structure and to 'come out' as the term is used in transgender lexicon. In chapter thirteen, Catherine addresses David:

Isn't it lucky Heiress and I are rich so you'll never have anything to worry about? We'll take good care of him won't we Heiress? (*The Garden*, 60).

In fact, David has written better since he has started, or was forced to start, his relationship with the two of them. In this novel, David follows the sexual advances or propositions made by Catherine in its entirety.

Catherine Bourne is an extreme, frenzied creation by Hemingway. She is a continuation as well as an improved version, a reiteration of Lady Brett Ashley. In fact, the exchange of sexual roles that occurred in *SAR*, prefigured that of *The Garden*. She resembles her in her central role in the novel and her "wit, edginess and unpredictability" (Comely: 214) spurs the narrative. In her character, Hemingway has incorporated an incipient madness which gives her an impetus for transgressing the normal and entering into Hemingway's desired gender sphere. At the onset of the novel, Catherine is a vibrant figure, desirous of creative racial and sexual transformation. She is an adventurous character who gradually becomes marginalized by David. Feeling desperate in her transgressive tendencies, she is pushed toward suicide. Since the publication of the novel, some critics accused her of anomaly and regarded her as a destructive force in the novel and in her relationship with David. As Amy Lovell reflects "Catherine wishes to inhabit the unstable territory between binaries – a place that breeds extreme tension, anxiety, and insecurity" (192). However, it must be noted that Catherine is more self-destructive than destructive to others and a more significant element in a realizing the impulses behind her actions and decisions is that she is more of a deconstructive character than a destructive one. In this light, the gender bending inclination of her character can make sense within a system of thought that does not follow the watertight heteronormative rules. In answering the moral dilemma of the book, those criticisms which favored David have sided with Marita, rather than with Catherine, particularly due to her burning of David's manuscript which echoes Hadley's loss of Hemingway's

manuscript in nineteen twenties; an accident Hemingway apparently never could overcome. Accordingly, Catherine cannot be forgiven by David. The failure of David – Catherine relationship in comparison with the success of David – Marita relationship lies in the fact that Catherine wishes to keep the dominant role in the relationship with David and imposes a passive, female role on him; Marita, on the other hand, while possessing David’s desired habit of transgressing sexual roles, knows the rules of the game and allows David to retain his sense of sexual dominance and superiority in their relationship. However, we need to be constantly reminded that Catherine is acting within the system of her own logic: rules according to which changing the gender role or burning the manuscript or bringing a third partner into their marriage seem totally justifiable. She does not want to be separated by any means from David and believes that the manuscript along with the clippings he constantly received about his book in the newspaper create a social persona for David that will ultimately distant him from their hard-earned symbiotic union. The manuscript, Catherine believes nurtures the public construction of David identity as a man, a male figure who is defined by the society’s metrics as flagging and successful. However, it is an image that Catherine feels does not represent his true identity. In one scene from chapter twelve, a short discussion on David’s first book breaks between David and Marita, which Catherine instantly spurns and cuts through. She allows no social constructions of the outer world to disturb the balance of their self-created gender roles in their self-made “Garden”. While David, though inconsistently, assumes “the cultural image of masculine authority which perpetuates itself in public sphere” (Lovell, 197), she abhors it and tries to hinder this trend by destroying one thing that stood for such a monolithic masculine function: his manuscript. In that regard, she symbolizes the woman Hemingway recognized as threat. David follows her sexual fantasies, allows her to sodomize him, let her decide for his haircut and even bleaches his hair quite identical to hers. Throughout the novel, she calls him “my girl”, “you’re my girl”, “how are you girl?”, “please be my girl” etc. And when she introduces Marita to their already transgressive marriage, he sleeps with both of them. He acts passively throughout the course of the novel, in that, despite his early reluctance, he accepts sexual favors from both women as long as it does not interfere with the process of his artistic creation. This is the territory upon which he does not approve of the transgression. As Spilka asserts: “The only way left for David to assert and reclaim his male identity is through the act of writing itself; it is there that he overcomes what seems to be the wound of androgyny. Thus, when Catherine destroys the African manuscripts, David is able to reassert that identity, and to overcome the corrupting effects of the androgynous wounding, by writing them again” (151). He continues to

add that

That he [Hemingway] presents David Bourne as the passive victim of those propensities is not surprising. Earlier male personas like Jake Barnes or the corrupt writer Harry in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” are presented as passive victims of weaknesses or conditions which they nonetheless bear or struggle against with stoic courage. (151)

The traditional masculine voice lying latent in Hemingway’s psyche surfaces and functions in favor of the masculine authority. This has been part of the unresolved dilemma within Hemingway for long. He had stored it within him and has expressed it on various other occasions. The ideal Hemingway woman, though, is the modern age, independent, domineering, sexually adventurous, and risk taking New Woman of the twenties with whom he can act out his desired gender-bending projects; however, this rule applies as long as it does not challenge or threaten his profession as an artist. There have been earlier instances of such bifurcated portrayal of women in the character of Pilar and its separation from the character of Maria in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or the frequent bitter references to Stein elsewhere in his writings. “In Hemingway’s later fiction the contradictory features of the modern woman are split into separate characters: Her negative traits are clearly identified and rejected, and her desirable characteristics are enlarged into positive female figures (e.g., Maria [*FWBT*], and Renata [*ARIT*]) who in their relationships with men return the longing for union” (Sanderson, 2005: 175). Hemingway dismantles his deep-rooted vexation and fear of emasculation by dividing the intimidating woman into two separate characters. Pilar and Maria each represent those female qualities he, respectively, feared and loved.

Yet, all his resistance does not change the broader pattern and the balance in the gender bending policy of the novel which is the dominant theme over the course of the book. The structure of *The Garden* can be analyzed in the light of Butler’s theory of the social construction of gender where, in *Gender Trouble*, she ascribes “a mimetic relation of gender to sex”. She asserts, “When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (6) [emphasis in the original]. In this sense, Catherine’s constant interplay between sexes and David’s fluidity of gender can be justified in that through their characterization, Hemingway has separated the apparent biological properties of gender as they form the binaries of male and female and the performative theory of gender which emphasizes its social

construction. Based on the aforementioned definition, Catherine's sex, sexuality and gender do not find their linear correspondence as it does in heteronormative circles. Therefore, her female body, as a feminine site, performs the masculine role in her marriage to David and in a similar mode so too does David's. As it is, Catherine dislikes both her sexual self and her gender self. On other occasions, however, Catherine switches between her self-designated role and assumes the role of a homosexual woman in her relationship with Marita. In this way, she is a myriad of free-floating gender attributes, performing her gender attributes as heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual at once.

In the complete version of the manuscript, prior to its present heavily-edited version by Tom Jenks at the Scribner's, the couple pay a visit to the Rodin Museum to visit the Rodin statue of *Metamorphosis*, though not named in the book. Nancy Comely describes the statue as

...represent[ing] an androgynous-looking couple in sensuous embrace, a fine example of Rodin's fascination with the erotic and with sexual fluidity. The statue thus functions as a subversive element, calling sexual binarism into question, because sexual differences are not easily discerned in these figures. Rodin has caught the moment when Iphis, a girl who has been brought up as a boy, is transforming into a male, thus validating her "masculine" love for the girl, Ianthe. But Rodin's boy, poised in the dominant sexual position, has breasts: the transformation is by no means complete. (215–216)

The identity of Catherine is, thus, dual and bended. In a normative framework, Catherine seems anomalous and as mentioned destructive; however, her character needs to be viewed as a woman who is trapped within the limitation of her gender's performative nature and is bored by the congealed features that invariably and monotonously characterize woman as a social-biological category who share similar and typical experiences such as pregnancy. She struggles in and out, and in effect, risk her life, to show how inauthentic such categories are and on the other hand, how fluid and contrasting the notion of gender can be. According to Butler's theory of subversion, "The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a deformity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction" (141). In line with these statements by Butler, Catherine believes and tries to prove to David (and perhaps to the world) that one's (gender) identity should be or is, in effect, an invention of one's personal intuitions, desires and particular understanding of what it means to be a man, a woman, a heterosexual or homosexual or bisexual. She decries of the social and discursive prescriptive assignments and denounces all cultural givens. Instead, she aspires to demonstrate the dynamic and fluctuating nature of gender

roles. “Catherine is a divided self” holds Lovell, “because she finds the female role an oppressive, predictable, and inexpressive form, she wants to escape. She has a heightened awareness of female stereotypes” (193).

Following the earlier arguments made by critics referring to the lack of the notion of family in his writings, the question of family in Hemingway’s fiction re-surfaces with the publication of *The Garden*. Hemingway has been accused of undermining the centrality of the notion of family through incorporating characters who are invariably homeless men, having no family not even a town to call home. The host of characters presented in *SAR* are typical of such outcaste expatriates wandering Europe. As a recurring concern in Hemingway’s fiction, the opposition of hollowness and barrenness of decadent life in Paris to the fertile Spanish land, finds its concretization in the absence of a procreative, organically successful family unit. However, given the above-mentioned discussion, the reader of a Hemingway’s text needs to bear in mind the subversive, destabilizing attitude he incorporates regarding the social regime, particularly in issues that touch on any form of bond or relationship. Therefore, the Hemingway hero does not belong to a biological, natural family structure and when he grows up as an adult fails to form a successful heterosexual relationship which culminates in a procreative bonding characterize by the blood ties, a marriage license, and producing children. In one story after another, Hemingway’s male and female characters are facing the anxiety of creating or failing to do so of a coherent family unit. The unnamed American man and Jig in “Hills Like White Elephants” represent an instance of one such case in which Hemingway blatantly portrayed the distortion and the destruction of the concept of a heterosexual family typified in an act of abortion. “Mr. and Mrs. Elliot” is another example of the failed attempt in building up a family unit which approaches normalcy. Such failure in the making up of the family unit can discursively be interpreted according to the theories of Judith Butler insofar as they display the socially constructed nature of family with regards to the “symbolic apparatus that gives it such powerful leverage in our nation – for example, biology, the natural, kinship, marriage, and the lawful” (Moddelmog, 2002: 174). Despite its symbolic significance to the American society, the biological family has historically failed to function properly for the minority groups or for its abused member who have withstood the burden of its shortcomings in long term. Given the failure of Hemingway’s personal experience in establishing a successful bond with his family members, he inevitably projects his own past experiences onto some of his heroes. He reflects the shortcomings, the perversions and the inherent failure of the institution of marriage in order to refute its primacy in the emotional life of his characters.

Yet, in order to compensate for that void, the characters construct their own version of relationship in the form of alternative families in order to prove how blurred the lines between a biological family and an alternative family can be. In *The Garden*, for instance, Hemingway intentionally defamiliarizes an already heterosexual family unit and turn them into a queer, homosexual relationship. At the beginning of the book, David and Catherine seem very much similar to the image of the American nuclear family typical in 1940s and 1950s with David taking on his masculine role as a writer and Catherine as a wifely woman purported to take care of the house and their marital relationship. However, with the introduction of the theme of sex-change and gender role reversal in the novel, Hemingway tries to distance the couple from the normalcy, pushing them toward more unorthodox tendencies, with each of them catering to their newly adopted performative gender role. The transgressing tendencies in Catherine changes David not only into a girl (Catherine), but also into her brother, therefore, adding a resonance of incest to their already groundbreaking shift between the sexes. The significance, however, is that with every added invention of Catherine, the three of them are moving further away from the concept of a traditional biological family and transcending into the realm of alternative queer family, thereby upsetting the dominant ideology that divides the sexes into male/female and genders into feminine/masculine. Another sign which further denaturalizes their family unit from what is deemed normal is the point Catherine makes about how legitimate their threesome relationship would be in another country, in Africa, where David, as a Muslim man could lawfully possess three wives and thereby legitimize his marriage to both women at the same time. It further denotes how socially and culturally bound the institution of family and in larger scale, the gender relationships are.

Conclusion:

Taken together, the significance of all the intertwined themes Hemingway has incorporated in this novel once again reminds us of the tension that was at work within his mind regarding the issue of possibility of gender transformation and sex-role change which, as they are, have their root in the androgynous inclinations stored within him since his early childhood.

“[T]he ultimate importance of Hemingway’s lifelong quarrel with androgyny” as Spilka reflects “was crucial to his creative strength throughout his life, and that he came remarkably, even heroically, close to affirming it before tragically betraying it as his life neared its grim conclusion” (152). That, perhaps, can explain in part why the text of *The Garden* was posthumously published. He wrestled with the idea to the very closing days of his life and left his tensions unresolved for us to

read between the lines of the then undisclosed text of *The Garden of Eden*.

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