

The Female Characters of Ernest Hemingway's “The Last Good Country”

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Abstract

The three primary female characters of Ernest Hemingway's unfinished story “The Last Good Country” are indispensable in aiding the male protagonist in his attempts at defying and subverting a malignantly depicted authority. In doing so, they defy and subvert authority themselves; the behavior depicted includes direct female defiance of traditional male authority figures. These strong and beneficent female characters are therefore directly at variance with the assertion by some feminist scholars since the 1970s that Hemingway women are misogynist stereotypes, an argument disputed in other research as well.

Introduction

Ernest Hemingway's fictional depiction of women has been an oft-contested topic, especially since the advent of feminist critiques in the 1970s. Opinions have ranged from Hemingway women as one-dimensional foils who embody the author's sexism to the view that Hemingway was in his later years experimenting with depictions of unconventional gender and sexual roles (particularly in his posthumously published novel *The Garden of Eden*). The purpose here is to illustrate the existence of confident, decisive, and independent female behavior – including subversion and defiance toward male authority figures in support of the protagonist – in Hemingway's unfinished short story “The Last Good Country” (1972).¹ While the idea of Hemingway's depiction of women as unrelentingly misogynistic has been frequently challenged, these particular characters have (to the best of my knowledge) not been included in such arguments.² I present them as further evidence that the female character in Hemingway is not necessarily a sexist stereotype, hopefully as a small but significant piece of the overall picture. In addition to being strong characters, they fall outside of the usual analyses of Hemingway women in that they are in non-romantic relationships with the hero yet play decisive and important roles in the story.³ Each one represents a different and vital mode of response to a hostile authority which is central to the story, and to which the protagonist also must respond.

Some Aspects of the Debate over the Depiction of Women in Hemingway's Fiction

At least since Judith Fetterley's impassioned denunciation of Ernest Hemingway (and not a few other male writers) in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1978), the role of women in the Hemingway tale has been a subject of much discussion and debate. Fetterley argues, for example, that the death in childbirth of Catherine Barkley, heroine of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), is Hemingway's declaration that “male life is what counts” and

“the only good woman is a dead one, and even then there are questions (71).”⁴ Catherine also seems to subsume her own identity within that of her lover, protagonist Frederic Henry, when she makes statements such as “I want what you want. There isn’t any me any more. Just what you want (*A Farewell to Arms*, 96).” In regard to this, Millicent Bell, argues:

[Catherine displays] a passivity which has irritated readers (particularly female readers) because it seems to be a projection of male fantasies of the ideally submissive partner. It results from her desire to please. She is a sort of inflated rubber woman available at will to the onanistic dreamer. (100-101)

This sharply contrasts with Margot, wife of the title character in the short story “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” (1938). Macomber, a wealthy American in his 30s, is on a big game hunt in Africa with Margot and their English hunting guide, Robert Wilson. Having lost his nerve and fled from a charging, wounded lion, Macomber is subtly mocked for cowardice by Margot. She later cuckolds Macomber by sleeping with Wilson, and finally shoots her husband to death as he is redeeming himself by facing down a charging buffalo (whether by accident or deliberately is left unanswered).

One common (if later challenged) perception within the view of Hemingway fiction as misogyny, then, has been that Hemingway women are often either spiteful, manipulative “bitches” such as Margot or emotionally weak characters like Catherine who depend fully upon the resolve and strength of the male protagonist (Mohammed, 23-24).

Regarding attitudes toward Hemingway in academia during the late 1970s and 1980s, Lisa Tyler asserts that “anecdotal evidence would indicate that some college and university professors chose to drop Hemingway’s work from their course reading lists, largely for perceived sexism, and openly disparaged him to their students,” but also notes that Hemingway heroine Catherine Barkley was later rehabilitated, including in papers written from a feminist perspective, particularly by academics such as Joyce Wexler (Tyler, x). Wexler asserts:

Catherine becomes Frederic’s model of courage by sustaining her capacity for love after the death of the man she loved. Her ability to find—or create—something of value in a world that resists human control is the primary example of bravery Frederic remembers after the war. (116)

Wexler also asserts one point of Frederic’s internal monologue as eulogizing Catherine’s courage: “If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them” (*A Farewell to Arms*, 222).⁵ Since Frederic’s first-person narration takes place *after* Catherine has died, in effect he is saying that Catherine was more courageous than himself. This directly contradicts Fetterley’s insistence that *A Farewell to Arms* celebrates the death of women (71).⁶

In connection with this is the view that the main female character in Hemingway acts as a one-dimensional foil to the hero. Disagreeing with this interpretation, Margaret D. Bauer argues:

Hemingway is often criticized for his one-dimensional characterization of the women in his fiction. I would suggest that such critics are actually arguing with Hemingway's choice of focus. The problem they have with Hemingway's female characters is not that they are one-dimensional (the numerous studies of them suggest otherwise), but that they are usually not central characters. I would argue that it is the writer's prerogative as to whose story he or she is most interested in telling. (126)

Bauer cites a number of scholarly arguments disputing, from various angles, the position that Hemingway's depiction of women is ubiquitously misogynistic. These include her own assertion that one's impression of an author's personal life may create bias in interpreting his or her writings. She notes that in the case of her students, "their image of Hemingway as some macho hunter, drinker, womanizer, or misogynist often blinds them to any positive reading of his female characters" (125).⁷

Another development in Hemingway scholarship is the opinion that his later work evinces ambiguity and experimentation in gender roles. A major focus in this regard has been the posthumously published novel *The Garden of Eden* (1986), which depicts a "complete" gender role reversal in which Catherine, the wife of protagonist David Bourne, has her hair cut very short, like a man's, and insists on identifying herself as male and her husband as female during sex.⁸

With this background in mind, the purpose here is to point out a Hemingway story depicting female characters in roles which are indispensable to the survival and success of the male protagonist: "The Last Good Country".

Overview of Ernest Hemingway's Nick Adams Stories

Nick Adams is a Hemingway protagonist who appears in a total of twenty-four short stories which (except for those posthumously published) originally saw publication between 1925 and 1933.⁹ The stories encompass Nick's life from boyhood through adolescence and into adulthood, eventually as a husband and father. As in much of Hemingway's work, the protagonist's life somewhat parallels that of the author. Nick, for example, spends summers camping and fishing in the woods of Michigan, as Hemingway did in real life. As a young man, Nick joins the Italian army to serve in World War I; Hemingway served in the war as a Red Cross ambulance driver on the Italian front until he was wounded and discharged. The young Nick Adams in "The Last Good Country" professes an ambition to be a writer (90). Moreover, unlike other protagonists, Nick appears in multiple stories and in various stages of life and thus is arguably the most autobiographical of Hemingway's characters. The stories were all published together in a single volume for the first time in *The Nick Adams Stories* (1972), including previously unpublished works.

"The Last Good Country": Summary, Relevant Characters, and Themes

The teenage Nick Adams has been illegally hunting, and he is being sought for arrest by a pair of game wardens.¹⁰ He escapes with provisions and camping gear into the woods with his

younger sister Littless, whom he reluctantly agrees to have along. Among those who aid him in his efforts to evade capture are three female characters: Littless; Mrs. Packard, who runs a local hotel and for whom Nick sometimes supplies trout for meals served in the hotel dining room; and Suzy, a young woman who works as a cook and housekeeper in Nick's house. The aid they provide supports Nick in different ways.

The themes of the story include resistance to and escape from authority, and the question of whether it is morally justified to subvert the law. Interestingly, Nick and Littless' escape into the wilderness, if only temporary, conforms to Sam Bluefarb's assertion that the theme of escape is repeated and common in American literature going back to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and also Leo Marx's thesis that there is a longing in the American cultural milieu (particularly expressed in literature) to experience a pastoral ideal which has been interrupted by the development of technology. Moreover, as the protagonist is a teenage boy escaping into the wilderness, one may wonder whether there are deliberate echoes here of *Huckleberry Finn*, a novel which Hemingway famously asserted was the origin of all American literature.¹¹

Littless: Nick's Moral Compass

Littless, Nick's younger sister, goes with him on his escape into the woods, toward an area of virgin forest, "the last good country" of the title (89). It is an arduous journey, but Littless wants to be with Nick. An important role Littless plays in the story is to keep Nick from doing anything foolhardy, specifically committing violence against his antagonists, the local game warden Evans and the warden from out of town, Henry Porter.

Nick expresses a desire to get a rifle and "kill both of those bastards while they're on the dock," to which Littless objects, insisting that "we're not going to kill people, Nickie. Will you promise me?" (74)

Similarly, Littless acts as a restraining influence on Nick's thought to kill Evan's son, who has told his father of Nick's poaching, has followed Nick and Littless and may possibly know of their hiding place.

"This is three times he's made us trouble."

"I know it, Nickie. But don't you kill him."

That's why she came along, Nick thought. That's why she's here. I can't do it while she's along.

"I know I mustn't kill him," he said. "There's nothing we can do now. Let's not talk about it."

"As long as you don't kill him," his sister said. "There's nothing we can't get out of and nothing that won't blow over." (129)

Littless, though still a child, is the voice of reason who prevents her headstrong brother from getting into more trouble than he already is, in addition to holding her own throughout a difficult woodland journey. She provides rational and moral anchorage to Nick which he is at the moment incapable of providing for himself, thereby keeping her brother alive and free. She represents patience and restraint in the face of hostile authority.

This aspect of Littless's behavior is also noted by Linda W. Wagner, who states that "The

Last Good Country” is a “story of peril and macho bravado” in which Littless “accepts her brother as guide and protector” on their woodland journey. At the same time Nick “realizes that Littless’s greater moral consciousness will protect him, will keep him from harming anyone...” (244).¹²

Mrs. Packard: Enabler and Co-conspirator

Mrs. Packard runs a local hotel, where she sometimes serves trout which Nick has caught and illegally sold to her. Prior to Nick and Littless’s departure, she provides them material support without which survival in the woods may have been impossible. As the game wardens wait at Nick’s house, Nick and Littless go to Mrs. Packard for help. Cooperating in a subversion of authority, Mrs. Packard and Nick maintain the outward fiction that nothing illegal is taking place regarding the trout Nick sells to her.

Mrs. Packard was a handsome woman in a gingham apron. She had a beautiful complexion and she was very busy and her kitchen help were there as well.

“You don’t mean you want to sell trout. Don’t you know that’s against the law?”

“I know,” Nick said. “I brought you the fish for a present. I mean my time for the wood I split and corded.”

“I’ll get it,” she said. “I have to go to the annex.”

Nick and his sister followed her outside. (76)

Once outside and out of earshot of the people in the hotel, Mrs. Packard gives Nick money and pledges the help of herself and her husband John, who runs a store in town.

“You get out of here,” she said quickly and kindly. “And get out of here fast. How much do you need?”

“I’ve got sixteen dollars,” Nick said.

“Take twenty,” she told him. “And keep that tyke out of trouble. Let her go home and keep an eye on them until you’re clear.”

“When did you hear about them?”

She shook her head at him.

“Buying is as bad or worse than selling,” she said. “You stay away until things quiet down. Nickie, you’re a good boy no matter what anybody says. You see Packard if things get bad. Come here nights if you need anything. I sleep light. Just knock on the window.” (77)

In one sense, Mrs. Packard plays a sort of quasi-parental and protective role, telling Nick he is a “good boy,” warning him away for his own safety, and strongly urging him not to take Littless the “tyke” with him into the woods (77). She is also Nick’s comrade in subversion, flaunting the law against buying or selling locally caught trout to their mutual benefit, telling Nick exactly what he needs to do to avoid capture, and providing indispensable material aid. She represents subterfuge and cunning in defiance to authority.

Suzy: Open Hostility to Authority

Suzy is the hired girl who works at Nick's house, where after Nick's escape the two game wardens have spent the night, hoping to catch Nick coming home. In the morning, Suzy fearlessly and openly shows her contempt for these traditional male authority figures, and by this time one can infer a pattern emerging in which the local people, whatever the laws may say, consider the game wardens and what they represent to be an unwarranted intrusion into their lives. This can be seen in the interaction between local warden Evans and Suzy.

The hired girl was building a fire in the stove and the warden said to her, "What about some breakfast?"

"No breakfast," she said. She slept in a cabin out behind the house and had come into the kitchen a half an hour before. The sight of the warden lying on the floor of the screen porch and the nearly empty bottle of whiskey on the table had frightened and disgusted her. Then it had made her angry.

"What do you mean, no breakfast?" the warden said, still holding the dipper.

"Just that."

"Why?"

"Nothing to eat."

"What about coffee?"

"No coffee."

"Tea?"

"No tea. No bacon. No corn meal. No salt. No pepper. No coffee. No Borden's canned cream. No Aunt Jemima buckwheat flour. No nothing."

"What are you talking about? There was plenty to eat last night."

"There isn't now. Chipmunks must have carried it away." (92-93)

In Suzy, Hemingway presents a young woman who refuses to carry out a traditional female role which is also in her job description (i.e. providing meals), and does so in hostile, contemptuous defiance of an older male authority figure.¹³ She feigns ignorance of Nick's whereabouts in just as hostile a manner (94-95), and then nonchalantly asks the men for a ride into town to buy groceries at John Packard's store (96). Later in the store Packard, also displaying contempt for the wardens and openly insulting them, accuses Henry Porter of having once been involved in framing an innocent man who was subsequently hanged (102). If generally believed, this could be part of the reason for the town's general hostility toward him. After the men have left, Suzy indicates to John Packard that she realizes Littless went with Nick into the woods to restrain Nick from killing Evan's son, yet she also mirrors Nick's feelings about the wardens when she says "I wanted to kill them both last night when they were asleep" (107).

Suzy, then, represents the most hostile and direct defiance to authority as she protects Nick by lying for him, and most closely shares his views and feelings. The specific role of each female character is conducive to Nick's escape and survival. If, for example, Nick and Suzy (who both express a desire to kill Nick's antagonists) had been in the woods instead of Nick and Littless, the game wardens and/or the son of the game warden Evans might indeed have been killed, putting Nick in much more serious trouble.¹⁴

Conclusion

The female characters in Hemingway's "The Last Good Country" play beneficent roles, providing vital aid to the protagonist in his struggle against an official authority Hemingway presents in a malignant light. Each of them helps Nick in a different way, and in ways he would not have been able to help himself: Littless's restraining Nick from violence; Mrs. Packard's material support and subterfuge; Suzy's lying about Nick's whereabouts to the wardens. Their actions are indispensable to any chance of Nick's success, and thus are at variance with the traditional view that Hemingway's depiction of women is unrelentingly misogynistic. Here it is the Hemingway hero who is quite literally depending on the women, thus the story serves as one example of the variegated and multi-dimensional nature of Hemingway's characters, both male and female.

A further point to note is that while an arguably "problematic" character such as Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* has a romantic relationship with the male protagonist, the characters described above from "The Last Good Country" have no such relationship with Nick. Littless is his sister, Mrs. Packard is his neighbor and "business associate" in the illicit trout trade, and Suzy is a cook and housekeeper at Nick's house. Thus it is possible that the straightforward and non-romantic nature of the relationships depicted in "The Last Good Country" play a role in precluding factors that have been either interpreted or disputed as evidence of Hemingway's negative female stereotyping. This is a point that may well merit further research.

Notes

- 1 "The Last Good Country," an unfinished fragment, was published posthumously as part of the short story collection *The Nick Adams Stories* (1972). While one might speculate as to whether Hemingway intended it to be a novel or short story, it seems tentatively safe to assume the latter, as all the completed Nick Adams works published in Hemingway's lifetime were short stories. Another intriguing possibility, however, is that Hemingway was attempting to create an early 20th century analogue to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which Hemingway praised as the essential source of all American literature. The parallels with Twain's iconic work—a young boy in trouble, escaping into the wilderness—may invite speculation that it was meant as a novel. (It runs 65 pages, somewhat long for a short story, and at the last page doesn't appear close to a resolution of the conflict.) If this is the case, it would have been the only Nick Adams novel. There is, however, no direct evidence for such a hypothesis known to this writer.
- 2 With the exception of Littless, whose role in this regard is noted by Linda W. Wagner (244).
- 3 This is qualified somewhat by the feelings Littless displays for Nick, as described in note 8.
- 4 Fetterley's position has maintained currency in academia. In a 2005 issue of the *NWSA Journal*, for example, Mariya Shymchyshyn writes that she intends to teach her students at Ternopil State Pedagogical University in Ukraine "Fetterley's theory of the resisting reader and then ask them to apply Fetterley's approach" (181). This is in accordance with her view that "Ukrainian misogynistic ideology was formed with considerable help from literature" (184), with the American literary canon playing a significant part (183).
- 5 Quoted in "E.R.A. for Hemingway," (121).

- 6 Interestingly, in a paper published before this one, Wagner opines that Catherine is “less successful than some of the women from [Hemingway’s] early short stories.” She agrees with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s remarks to that effect in a letter he sent to Hemingway (no date given) after reading *A Farewell to Arms*; Fitzgerald writes “in the stories you were really listening to women—here you’re only listening to yourself.” Wagner’s thesis is that many Hemingway women are more mature than the men, i.e. “the women have already reached that plateau of semi-stoic self-awareness which Hemingway’s men have, usually, yet to attain” (239).
- 7 Another reassessment of the traditional view of Hemingway’s depiction of women is *Hemingway and Women: Female Critics and the Female Voice* (Ed. Lawrence R. Broer, Gloria Holland), in which essays by sixteen female scholars provide insights on the literary value of Hemingway’s work. There is a specific focus on female characters, as stated in the introduction: “We see these women not as Hemingway accessories but as accomplished women, heroines in their own right, diverse and complete as individuals,” and that “Hemingway’s most compelling female characters have their genesis in the real-life women whose import to his art has often been marginalized and trivialized.” There is also mention of the idea that Hemingway’s own struggle with “conflicting feelings” on sexuality are expressed in his female characters (xiii).
- 8 Two things should be noted here regarding *The Garden of Eden*. First, the published content represents only about one-third of Hemingway’s original manuscript. The only way to view the facsimile of the original is to go to the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston; copying is allowed by transcription only. Scribner, the publisher, has not released a scholarly edition of the novel despite repeated requests to do so (Del Gizzo, Svoboda, ix). In connection with this, the extent to which Hemingway depicts unconventional gender roles and sexuality in the original manuscript has been argued as being far greater than in the published edition. Of particular note are the arguments of Debra A. Modellmog, who claims that by examining unpublished portions of the manuscript “within the context of prominent discourses on gender, race, and sexuality circulating early in the 20th century and often functional today,” it is seen that Hemingway expresses an obsession with “desires that transgress cultural laws,” particularly sexual desires (257). She maintains that the omission of certain scenes and characters from the published version reveals the intention of Scribner (and editor Tom Jenks) to release a version of *The Garden of Eden* that reaffirms “the cultural myth of Hemingway” (256), which she connects with an alliance of capitalist interests and “the psychic, social, and sexual needs of a segment of the American population” (i.e. white heterosexual men) (268). This is done, she argues, in an effort not to “abdicate the power of male privilege and the power of the penis” (280). So in this argument, in contrast with a focus on purported sexism in Hemingway’s fiction, there is an assertion of sexism (among other things) on the part of Hemingway’s publisher. Secondly, I infer that the fantasized female-to-male transformation in *The Garden of Eden* is partly paralleled in “The Last Good Country,” as Nick’s younger sister Littless cuts her hair short and calls herself his “brother,” with Nick jokingly playing along (112-113). This is analogous to *The Garden of Eden*, in which Catherine, after initiating her gender-bending role play, says to David, “You don’t really mind being brothers, do you?” Like Nick in “The Last Good Country,” David goes along with Catherine’s fantasy, calling her “brother” (21-22). In *The Last Good Country* there is also a sort of emotional (as opposed to physical) incest in which Littless says to Nick “I want to be your common-law wife. I read about it in the paper” (121). Nick’s reflects upon this in the narrative: “He loved his sister very much and she loved him too much. But, he thought, I guess those things straighten out. At least I hope so” (119). Whatever one thinks of Modellmog’s interpretation of *The Garden of Eden* and Scribner’s publishing process (and I would need to see the original manuscript myself before coming to a conclusive view of the matter), I

would agree that Scribner's refusal to publish a scholarly edition is both problematic and suspicious. "The Last Good Country," like *The Garden of Eden*, was not published in Hemingway's lifetime, so its existence supports the view that he was experimenting with themes of sexuality (however they may be interpreted) which he may have thought too inflammatory to make public.

- 9 Mark Spilka notes "the last date on [Hemingway's] unfinished manuscript for 'The Last Good Country' is July 20, 1958," and also states that Hemingway stopped writing the story so he could work on his manuscript of *The Garden of Eden* (277). This is interesting in light of the motifs of androgyny found in both works (see note 8). Moreover, Hemingway's work on a Nick Adams tale 25 years after the last Nick Adams story saw print may lend credence to the hypothesis that "The Last Good Country" was intended as a novel (see note 1).
- 10 Nick's age is not stated. His being a teenager is my own inference based partly upon Little's telling Nick that the wardens planned to send him to reform school (71). Thus Nick can shoot well enough to effectively violate hunting laws, but is too young to send to prison.
- 11 See note number 1.
- 12 In contrast to Wagner, I am considering the protective and supporting influence of the three major female characters together, and how they facilitate Nick's defiance of authority.
- 13 It is also perhaps significant that Hemingway, known for his frequent drinking, depicts Suzy as disgusted and angry at the fact that the warden had been drinking on the job. This may not be as incongruous as it sounds, as Hemingway reportedly maintained that he never drank while writing (Martineau).
- 14 Though there is also the possibility that Nick is simply venting adolescent rage and, like Suzy, would not really kill them if given the chance.

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