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18

PAPAWAS MAMA'S BOY: MATERNAL INFLUENCEANDTHE ANDROGYNOUS WOMANIN HEMINGWAY'S EARLY NOVELS

Dr. Manisha Mathur
Associate Professor, Department of English, Mata Sundri College for Women, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Abstract

Ernest Hemingway's literary legacy is often associated with terse prose, emotional restraint, and themes of hyper masculinity. Yet, beneath this surface lies a nuanced engagement with gender identity and psychological conflict, particularly in relation to the depiction of women. This paper explores how Hemingway's portrayal of female characters in The Sun Also Rises *and* A Farewell to Arms *reflects deeper tensions rooted in his own upbringing and internal conflicts. Using psychoanalytic and gender theory frameworks, this paper demonstrates how Hemingway's personal history especially his androgynous rearing by his mother, Grace Hemingway shaped his complex treatment of gender and identity. Grace Hemingway's decision to dress Ernest and his sister Marcelline alike and treat them as twins contributed to a blurring of gender boundaries during his formative years. This androgynous upbringing, coupled with Hemingway's reported aversion toward his mother, can be looked at a psychological development through the lens of a reversed Oedipus Complex, according to the theorist Mark Spilka and through the Lacanian theory of the Symbolic and the Imaginary. In A Farewell to Arms, the relationship between Frederic and Catherine illustrates a longing for androgynous unity, with the two characters functioning almost as mirrors or extensions of each other. Similarly, in The Sun Also Rises, Lady Brett Ashley assumes a masculine-coded dominance over the emasculated Jake Barnes, presenting a relationship that destabilizes normative gender binaries. These characterizations reflect Hemingway's internal struggle with identity, autonomy, and emotional interdependence.*

Keywords

Oedipus Complex, Androgyny, Masculinity, Identity, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Ernest Hemingway is one of the most influential and widely read American authors of the 20th century. His succinct, yet powerful prose style, along with his passion for exploring themes of war, love, and the human condition, has left a lasting impression on literature. One of Hemingway's most defining characteristics as a writer is his distinctive prose style. He is known for his economy of words, a style often referred to as the "Iceberg Theory." Hemingway believed that the deeper meaning of a story should be largely submerged beneath the surface. His fictional universe is often constructed as a "clean, well-lighted place" minimalist in form yet saturated with emotional and psychological tension. At its core lies a deep preoccupation with masculinity: an insistent performance of bravery, stoicism, and control through bullfighting, hunting, and other traditionally "manly" pursuits. However, this performative masculinity often feels overstated, suggesting an underlying fragility. Critics have observed that Hemingway "tries too hard" to "be a man", a tension that invites a psychoanalytic reading of gender anxiety and identity formation. Within this context, the conspicuous absence or symbolic marginalization of women in much of

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his work becomes especially significant. In texts dominated by father-son bonds, fraternal friendships, and heroic solitude, the presence of women is either erased or reduced to projections of emotional dependency and psychic instability.

Where female characters do appear, they often serve as narrative contrasts to the strong male heroes, displaying vulnerability, or androgynous ambiguity rather than agency. This dynamic is not merely thematic but psychological, rooted in Hemingway's ambivalent relationship with the feminine. His frequent return to a universe of "men without women" signals not just narrative preference, but a psychological defense mechanism; an attempt to regulate the maternal and erotic threat posed by the feminine other.

Interestingly, many of Hemingway's fictional heroines were inspired by real women in his life: Brett Ashley after Duff Twysden, Catherine Barkley after Agnes von Kurowsky, and Maria after Martha Gellhorn. Yet in their fictional rendering, these women are transformed into idealized or abstracted figures, mirrors for Hemingway's own psychic negotiations between attachment and autonomy, masculinity and androgyny. Their narrative roles illuminate the unresolved tensions between desire, dependency, and emotional containment that animate Hemingway's work and psyche alike.

Ernest Hemingway's work has been framed within the critical discourse of masculine style of writing. Early feminist critics like Judith Fetterley (1978) categorized Hemingway's women as either passive objects or symbolic representations of male anxiety. His 1927 short story collection *Men Without Women* reinforced this narrative, reiterating the notion that Hemingway's literary world privileged male friendships.

Carl Eby, takes on a psychoanalytical approach in his *Hemingway's Fetishism* (1999) which explores themes of sexual repression, castration anxiety, and maternal fear in Hemingway's writing. Eby situates women in Hemingway's fiction as both desired and feared objects, often representing loss of control, rooted in the author's early maternal experiences. Similarly, Nancy R. Comley and Robert Scholes (1994) in *Hemingway's Genders* challenge monlithic constructions of Hemingway's masculinity. They argue that his sparse, "masculine" style is not simply a mark of repression, but a performative strategy that both enacts and conceals vulnerability and uncertainty about identity formation.

Judith Butler's work on the performative construction of gender has significantly reshaped interpretations of Hemingway's characters, particularly Lady Brett Ashley and Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*. Critics such as Debra Moddelmog (1999) have used Butler's framework to argue that gender in Hemingway's fiction is not fixed but fluid Brett's masculine presentation and emotional assertiveness, along with Jake's physical impotence and emotional passivity, destabilize the binary model of gender and introduce an androgynous relationship pattern.

In *A Farewell to Arms*, critics such as Sandra Whipple Spanier (1990) and Lisa Tyler (2003) note that Catherine Barkley's desire to become "one" with Frederic Henry, including her willingness to subsume her identity and even her body into his, can be read as a tragic enactment of identity fusion. Spanier reads Catherine as both a maternal and erotic figure, reinforcing the psychological projection of the feminine ideal rooted in Hemingway's unresolved maternal tensions. Tyler goes further, suggesting that Catherine's idealization and eventual death serve a symbolic purpose: the cutting off of emotional dependency that mirrors the psychological need to escape the domineering mother figure. Hemingway harboured a deep hatred towards his mother, often stating that he wished she were dead. A deconstructed reading of Hemingway's "masculine" style becomes not a hallmark of control, but a site of anxiety.

Thus, recent scholarship has moved beyond the reading of "misogynist Hemingway" versus "stoic genius" to a more layered view of his fiction as a psychological and symbolic area where gender, identity, and emotional trauma are negotiated. This paper builds on such

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approaches, particularly psychoanalysis and gender theory to argue that Hemingway's depiction of women is a projection of inner psychic conflict, a reversed Oedipus Complex and negotiating the complex terrain of Lacanian Imaginary and Symbolic.

The Mother Complex and Androgynous Upbringing in Hemingway's Identity Formation:

One of the most profound psychological influences on Ernest Hemingway was his mother, Grace Hall Hemingway, an overbearing figure who broke the stereotype of the submissive Victorian woman. Grace assumed supreme authority within the Hemingway household, overshadowing her husband and reversing traditional gender roles. This maternal dominance profoundly shaped Hemingway's emotional development and became a foundational source for many of his female characters. Critics like Mark Spilka and Kenneth Lynn argue that Grace's control left a deep psychological scar on Hemingway, fostering an unresolved Mother Complex that permeated both his personal relationships and literary imagination.

Grace raised Hemingway androgynously, dressing him identically with his sister Marcelline and styling his hair in a loose, feminine hairdo until the age of six. She treated the two as twins, alternating their gender-coded identities at times urging Ernest to "be a little man" and at others to behave like Marcelline. This practice resulted in early gender confusion, what Spilka later termed *Hemingway's quarrel with androgyny***.** He himself admitted hating his mother and blamed her for the 1928 suicide of his father, Clarence Hemingway. After her death in 1951, Hemingway refused to attend her funeral and wrote in a letter, "I hate her guts and she hates mine. She forced my father to suicide" (Meyers, 378).

These experiences echo Nancy Chodorow's theory of gender development, which combines psychoanalysis and sociology to explore how boys experience masculinity by defining themselves in opposition to femininity. In *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1994), Chodorow writes: "A boy in order to feel himself adequately masculine, must differentiate himself from others in a way that a girl need not… He defines masculinity negatively—as that which is not feminine and/or connected to woman" (Chodrow, 94).

Hemingway's emotional detachment from his mother and his desperate desire to distance himself from the feminine resulted in a hyper-masculine public persona; bullfighting, deep-sea fishing, hunting, all infused with symbolic assertions of control, risk, and virility. The moniker "Papa," which Hemingway adopted later in life, served not just as a literary brand but as a psychological defense, a mask for deeper insecurities born from gender confusion and maternal trauma.

This deep-seated conflict also aligns with Freud's Oedipus complex, albeit in a reversed form. Whereas the classical Oedipal model assumes a boy's desire for the mother and rivalry with the father, Hemingway's emotional trauma reversed this model: he resented his mother, idealized his father, and internalized a fear of maternal control. Observing Grace's emotional dominance over Clarence, Hemingway perceived his father as weak, even emasculated-thus reconfiguring his mother not as the object of desire but as the symbolic castrating figure.

In this light, the Lacanian Mirror Stage provides further insight. The child's formation of identity through reflected images is heavily influenced by the mother. In Hemingway's case, early signs of confusion such as his fear that Santa Claus wouldn't recognize his gender at age three indicate a fractured mirroring process. Rather than forming a stable ego, Hemingway's identity became a site of contradiction: caught between the masculine ideal he projected and the feminine entanglement he could not fully reject.

The residue of this identity crisis pervades his fiction. His heroines, Catherine Barkley, Maria, and Renataare docile, submissive, and emotionally dependent, embodying the inverse of Grace Hemingway's persona. Catherine, in particular, desires complete submission to Frederic, even

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erasing her individuality. Brett Ashley, however, disrupts this pattern. Her androgynous traits and sexual agency make her an anomaly, closer to Grace than to Hemingway's idealized women. Consequently, Brett remains unattainable and emotionally dangerous, reinforcing the unresolved ambivalence of the mother complex.

This internal conflict also surfaced in Hemingway's later life, particularly during the composition of *The Garden of Eden*, an incomplete novel filled with themes of gender fluidity, hair fetishism, and identity reversal. Hemingway dyed his hair red, referred to himself as "Catherine," and his wife as "Peter", names from the novel's protagonists. In a bizarre but revealing episode in 1953, he signed documents as "Ernest Kathrin Hemingway" and referred to his wife as "Mary Peter Hemingway." This behaviour reflects a repressed but persistent entanglement with androgyny, a psychic legacy rooted in his early maternal relationship. This paper will primarily focus on the reversed Oedipus Complex theory and Lacan's Mirror Stage theory to analyse the texts.

Androgyny and the Reversed Oedipus Complex in *The Sun Also Rises*:

Hemingway's novel, *The Sun Also Rises* depicts to a very large extent events that happened during his visit to the Spanish Fiesta. Gertrude Stein, was of the view that the novel depicted the bohemian lifestyle of the "Lost Generation" It initially came under attack from critics for its immoral characters and loose living. The novel, however, explores themes of postwar disillusionment and the existential search for meaning in the aftermath of World War I. Set in Paris, it portrays a community of expatriate Americans engaged in a lifestyle marked by emotional detachment, hedonism, and moral ambiguity.

The principal characters of the novel are Jake Barnes, Brett Ashley, Robert Cohn, Bill Gorton and Mike Campbell. Jake is wildly in love with the irresistibly beautiful Brett who defies traditional gender norms and expectations. With her short hair, fluid sexuality and an abandoned nature, Brett appears as a complex androgynous character, "The New Woman", who was modelled after Duff Twy send a woman with whom Hemingway was in loverett's fluid sexuality not only unsettles the rigid binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality that structured early 20th-century discourse but also gestures toward a deeper discomfort with fixed identity itself. In defying clear categorization, she embodies the era's broader anxieties about gender and desire becoming less a character than a challenge to the cultural need for sexual legibility.

Brett is the New Woman and asserts her sexual autonomy in a way that directly confronts early 20th-century gender expectations. In contrast, Jake's war-inflicted impotence strips him of traditional masculine power, creating a relationship dynamic defined not by physicality but by emotional proximity and deferred desire. Yet it is precisely this absence this unfulfilled consummation that lends their bond its symbolic charge. Brett's cropped hair, assertive presence, and emotional opacity does not merely challenge Jake; they displace him. Her rejection of his plea:"Couldn't we live together... It's my fault Jake; it's the way I'm made" (Hemingway, 48)is not simply a refusal of intimacy, but a radical inversion of gendered norms. In occupying the position of emotional authority and self-containment, Brett becomes the figure of masculine detachment often found in Hemingway's male protagonists revealing the instability of gender performance within the novel.

Sukrita Paul Kumar's observation that Brett functions as "the woman as hero" around whom male characters orbit "like satellites" (Kumar, 64) is more than a gender inversion—it is a disruption of narrative gravity itself. Brett doesn't just drive the novel's emotional core; she shifts its axis. In defying submissive or secondary roles, she becomes a destabilizing presence who reconfigures the relational dynamics between masculinity and femininity. Her assertiveness, sexual freedom, and emotional detachment do not merely reflect a modern female archetype, they

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mirror the fractured psychic terrain from which Hemingway writes. Brett's centrality is thus not only structural but symbolic: she embodies the unresolved contradictions in Hemingway's emotional history, where admiration, resentment, desire, and fear toward the feminine all coexist uneasily.

The novel can also be analysed through Mark Spilka's concept of the reversed Oedipus complex, in which Hemingway's hostility was not directed toward the father, as Freud suggested, but toward the mother. Grace Hemingway's dominance and androgynous parenting instilled in Hemingway a deep maternal ambivalence, which surfaces in Brett, the only woman "beyond the control or transformation of her male counterpart" (Spilka, 31). Jake's impotent longing echoes Hemingway's own fear of feminine power and emotional instability (Spilka, 25–30). Lacan's theory deepens this conflict: in the Imaginary, Brett mirrors Jake's longing for wholeness, but in the Symbolic, she becomes the unattainable Other, enacting his symbolic castration (Lacan, 75–78). Brett is not merely destructive—she embodies Hemingway's psychic fracture: ideal and threat, mother and lover, autonomy and loss.

Together, these perspectives reveal Brett Ashley as more than a "destructive woman" She is a character with emotional power, symbolic tension, and psychic dislocation. She contains Hemingway's conflicted vision of womanhood desirable, maternal, and threatening and channels the psychological remanent of a childhood shaped by a powerful maternal figure. In doing so, *The Sun Also Rises* becomes a novel where Hemingway dramatizes not only the loss of sexual power, but also the loss of emotional authority and masculine certain.

Maternal Longing, Identity Fusion, and Gender Collapse in *A Farewell to Arms*:

Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms is a literary masterpiece that not only captures the tumultuous backdrop of World War I but also presents readers with a complex and enigmatic character, Catherine Barkley. As has already been mentioned all of Hemingway's heroines were based on real life women. Catherine Barkley's character is based on two women Hemingway knew and loved; Agnes Von Kurowsky, an American nurse who cared for him when he was seriously injured on the war front and his wife Hadley. The story of Hemingway and Agnes began during the war and ended unhappily like all war romances. Their story is similar to that of Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley in A Farewell to Arms. Henry, a Red Cross Volunteer and an ambulance driver in the Italian army gets badly wounded at the front and comes to a hospital in Milan. Here he falls in love with Catherine, the British nurse who manages the night shift every day. In the novel, Hemingway describes her hair by comparing it to shinning water: "Miss Barkley was quite tall. She wore what seemed to me to be a nurse's uniform, was blonde and had a tawny skin and gray eyes. I thought she was very beautiful… She had wonderfully beautiful hair and I would lie sometimes and watch her twisting it up in the light that came in the open door and it shone even in the night as water shines sometimes before it is really daylight" (Hemingway, 22).

Hemingway thought that Agnes would marry him but she did not. He was shocked by the rejection; she was perhaps the most influential woman in his life after his mother. The trauma of her "betrayal", for that is how he interpreted it had a deep impact on him. How could a woman reject him? His image of a woman was that of someone submissive and weak, something that Agnes was not. Jeffrey Meyers is of the opinion that this "betrayal" forced him into instinctive self- protection. For the rest of his life says Meyers, Hemingway "guarded himself" by forging a liaison with a future wife during his current marriage and when he had ensured his own emotional security, he abandoned his wife before she could leave him. While Meyer's analysis maybe true, Hemingway wanted to "punish" Agnes. Since he could not do so in real life, he punished her model Catherine by making her die during childbirth. Catherine suffers excruciating trauma of childbirth and she and her baby die towards the end of the novel.

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On the other hand, Hadley Richardson, Hemingway's first wife was a meek and submissive woman, very much like Catherine Barkley. The heroine of his most famous novel has been described as an abstraction, merely an image by many critics. Throughout the novel, she appears amenable to Henry's suggestion, eager to please him, perhaps too eager, sometimes unrealistically so. Her constant refrain seems to be: "There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you if I could. I'm yours. There isn't anything of me that belongs to me" (Hemingway, 152) Catherine is a woman who rescues, pities, comforts and mothers. Catherine half mothers, half mistresses Henry. Her identity is reflected in her lover and she wants to merge into an androgynous oneness with him : " Please don't make up a separate me" (Hemingway, 258) At one point in the novel Catherine proposes that she and Frederic get identical haircuts: " Let it grow a little longer and I could cut mine and we'd just be alike. Only one of us blonde and one of us dark. It might be a nice situation. Then we'd both be alike. Oh darling I want you so much I want to be you too… You are. We're the same one" (Ibid, 258).Catherine serves not only as a lover but as an emotional and symbolic stand-in for the maternal figure nurturing, consoling, and ultimately self-effacing. Her desire to become "one" with Frederic reflects his unconscious yearning to return to a state of psychic wholeness that predates separation and individuation.

As Spilka argues, Catherine's death in childbirth thus functions as more than narrative tragedy; it is a symbolic severance from the maternal object. The emotional intensity of their relationship, once comforting, becomes fatal. Hemingway could not fully integrate the feminine without also experiencing psychic danger. The maternal figure, when fully internalized, threatens to consume the masculine self; death is the only acceptable escape (Spilka, 29).From a Lacanian perspective, Catherine's role in Frederic's psyche reflects the dynamic between the Imaginary and the Symbolic orders. In the Imaginary, she embodies emo a mirror through which Frederic momentarily reclaims his lost sense of self. However, Catherine also becomes a figure of the Symbolic: an object regulated by loss, absence, and social codes. In losing Catherine, Frederic is severed from the maternal ideal and made to submit to the emotional detachment and stoicism demanded by masculine individuation.

Carlos Baker observes that Hemingway's heroines often function more as aesthetic symbols than as fully developed characters-"aspects of the poetry of things," rather than psychologically complex individuals. His portrayal of Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* reflects this tendency toward reductive characterization. Catherine is rendered as abstract and rootless; the reader is given no insight into her past, no family history, and no inner world beyond her relationship with Frederic Henry. Her identity exists entirely in relation to him. She expresses little concern for where she goes or what she does, so long as she remains by his side. At one point, upon seeing a fox in the snow, Catherine wistfully imagines how peaceful it would be to exist in such a non-human condition free from thought, identity, or individual will, an echo of her desire for total emotional and existential surrender. This self-erasure further intensifies her symbolic function, aligning her not with a fully realized woman, but with an idealized construct shaped entirely by the needs of the male protagonist.

Conclusion:

To conclude, Ernest Hemingway's literary landscape, long perceived through the lens of masculine austerity and emotional reticence, is more deeply layered with gendered anxieties and unresolved maternal entanglements than his stylistic restraint might suggest. Through a close examination of *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*, this paper has shown how Hemingway's portrayal of women particularly Brett Ashley and Catherine Barkley is deeply intertwined with his own psycho-sexual development, especially the enduring imprint of his mother, Grace Hemingway. Employing the theoretical frameworks of Mark Spilka's reversed

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Oedipus Complex and Jacques Lacan's mirror stage and symbolic order, we uncover how Hemingway's heroines act less as autonomous characters and more as mirrors of masculine fragility and desire for psychic wholeness. Brett's androgyny and emotional dominance mirror the mother figure he could not control, while Catherine's willingness to dissolve her identity into Frederic's reflects an idealized maternal submission that must ultimately be destroyed to preserve the masculine self. Hemingway's performative masculinity, marked by exaggerated virility and symbolic pursuits like bullfighting and hunting, appears not as stable identity but as compensation for a fractured one. His fiction becomes the stage upon which gender, identity, and maternal fear are negotiated through, abstractions, and deaths. The ideal woman in Hemingway's world is not a partner but a projection, a psychic placeholder for the mother who haunted his past and shaped his prose. In the end Papa Hemingway, unable to escape maternal forces, remained a mama's boy.

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