TRAILS OF EXPANDED GENDER IN HEMINGWAY'S LADY BRETT ASHLEY

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INTRODUCTION

Emest Hemingway was a male chauvinist pig. This ad hominem attack against him and his writing is often-repeated, stereotypical polemic that hardly needs scholarly citation. And yet Hemingway paradoxically also created strong female characters who were tough, witty, and supremely independent. Highlighted in this paper is one such character from his 1926 novel, The Sun Also Rises. Lady Brett Ashley in Hemingway’s novel becomes a heroine whose sexual behavior, physical appearance, and personal philosophy helped expand modern sociological gender norms.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

Regarding her sexual behavior, Lady Brett Ashley (Brett) is the star in this book. Her sexual views and activities helped to widen conceptions about how modern women may behave. She’s a thirty-five year old divorcée who not only presents as a woman, but she also likes to talk about Sex, and women who openly discuss sex, was a fairly taboo subject during Hemingway’s time. If coupling is a less forbidden topic for women today, we may owe some of that freedom to literary characters like Brett. “Brett had affairs with men before you were a boy,” one woman says. Brett is knowledgeable, not only about sex, but also about literature. She tells the boys about everything. Hemingway 144. Here, it seems Carol is discussing Brett’s sexual liberation. She likes pleasure and being in sexually active, and really values her carnal knowledge. Yet she is simultaneously unattached to any one man. Several authors pursue Brett, and many would like to marry her. These would-be husbands seek to force her into the wife role she eschews. Men throughout the novel would also like to fulfill their own traditional roles as (presumably) dutiful husbands. “The Brett is a bawdy hornet who burns little interest in male relationships. She’s been married twice already. Furthermore, as the commentator Rachael Wills argues, the sexual dynamics between the characters of Brett and Jake are complicated (Wills 33). Indeed, their gender roles seem flipped, or reversed. In the sexual arena, she is the he and he is the she. Jake is a man who has lost his sexual abilities due to a lifelong injury he suffered during the war. Since he can’t have sex, he sexually yearns to dominate to rule. She can have sex, and she does. Decker argues that during Hemingway’s Lost generation years, a male’s sexual abilities are praised by society as masculine and strong. Lady Brett Ashley emphasizes the very attributes that Jake lacks to “find little of use” (Decker 77). Brett’s sexuality is in question. Brett’s sexuality defines key features of her identity. As Brett thrives in her freedom of sexuality, Jake must define himself, his gender role, and his identity. As literary reviewer Allison Field argues, the “necessity, drunkenness, and contradictory roles of behavior” in The Sun Also Rises play little room for traditional connotations between characters (Field 205).

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

In addition to her sexual prowess, Lady Brett Ashley’s physical appearance has also helped expand modern sociological gender norms. In the first scene of the novel, the character of Brett as a “slippery jessey washer and a tweed aunt” from “The Sun Also Rises” (Hemingway 28). Her hair, he says, “was brushed back like a boy’s. She started all that” (Hemingway 29). Brett’s fashion revolutionaries, she dressed out of tradition. As the writer “slipping” points out, Brett embodies certain androgynous characteristics of a “New Woman” (Yu 177). Brett’s freedom to dress or she pleases shows that her gender role is fluid, dynamic, and not bound by the rigid confinement of her garments. Proudly, Brett shows off her non-conventional identity through her consciously redone appearance.

PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

Since the sun also rises, you’ll have to fight the bull. Brett’s personal philosophy helped expand modern sociological gender norms. Brett is created for the character who is also liberated in her personal philosophy. She thinks for herself. Witty, caustic, string-minded and independent she is a heroine who helped to widen sociocultural definitions of femininity in our culture. Even if her character was created by a man, she is a literary role model for women to follow. For example, many women may have been traditionally taught to be mild and meek-like Brett she desires courage and in need of protection. (Brett’s) She’s tough. She’s mentally tough during hand bull fights, for example, when events get bloody. Brett boldly watches with wide eyes detachment as bulls and homes are marked. Brett is quite desensitized to the sickening malodies and the suffering of helpless creatures may have been survive in the domain of many men only. Yet anyone, including Ernest Hemingway, and we watch Brett in the Pamplona bull fights. Jake attempted to warn her that bull fights are masculine and brutal. He implores her to close her delicate eyes. “Don’t look at the horns” he says, “after the bull hits them” (Hemingway 101). Brett is not surprised everyone with her ability to watch game animals die wuth a blink. “I didn’t feel badly at all”, she interjects (Hemingway 169). Brett’s over-wrapping point is that Brett has assumed her position as a strong new woman, and she is not held down by the soft old gender traditions. Yu explains that Brett is breaking from the structure of Victorianism (Yu 177). During the Victorian Age, “the reality, women were treated as delicate child beings. Their leisure activities might just include bold face attendances at manly bull fights. Brett is a new kind of woman. She’s more involved in masculine activities, she’s more adventurous, and perhaps less inclined to bunt on nice-smelling cushions while sipping tea and gossiping about servants. She has masculine thoughts and behaves; she acts upon her freedom with physiological vigor and strength.” She is a character who is always on the head and pen of Ernest Hemingway, is a new genre of womanhood.

“...To hell with you, Lady Ashley.”
—Ernest Hemingway, The Sun Also Rises

CONCLUSION

With all of her traits—sexual liberation, expanded fashion interpretations, a tougher belief system—Brett emerges from this novel as a leader and teacher of gender fluidity. Her character has widened our perceptions of what it means to be a woman. In these ways, Hemingway has created a socioculturally progressive character who helps us to “rethink the meanings and boundaries of our genders” (Kaplan and Grover 24). The compartmental nature of static gender roles is an unhealthy concept. Hard men versus soft women are impossible traits to maintain; in order to thrive in this life people of both genders must exhibit both toughness and softness depending upon the context. Sometimes women behave in ways that are traditionally defined as feminine, and sometimes they act more like men. So Ernest Hemingway, despite being a male chauvinist pig, has given a gift to modern culture. The “New Woman In The Sun Also Rises” (Dalia 27). Brett’s a fashion maverick; she dresses out of tradition. As the writer says, “was brushed back like a boy’s. She started all that” (Hemingway 29). Her hair, he

WORKS CITED


