

“Sex Explains It All”:

Gender in the Literature  
of Ernest Hemingway  
and Robert Frost

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On my honor, I have not received any unacknowledged aid on this thesis.  
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this project would never have evolved beyond its earliest stages.  
I am forever in their debt.

*in memory of  
my grandfather*

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## Introduction

"Gender" is a dangerous term, particularly when used by a male in his study of two male writers, one of whom is often characterized as a notorious misogynist. Any consideration of the relative importance Robert Frost (1874-1963) and Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) attach to the concept of gender requires a working definition of the term. In her critical anthology *The Gender of Modernism* (1990), Bonnie Kime Scott writes:

Gender is a category constructed through cultural and social systems.

Unlike sex, it is not a biological fact determined at conception. Sociology has long discussed sex roles, the term *roles* calling attention to the assigned rather than determined nature of gender. . . . In history, across cultures, and in the lifetime development of the individual, there are variations in what it means to be masculine or feminine. (2)

The fundamental point is that "gender" implies something other than biological differences between men and women; although dependent upon such a natural dichotomy, "gender" encompasses the social and cultural presumptions which accompany the purely biological fact of being male or female. A specific culture's method of gender classification, then, creates an elaborate system of expectations that establishes and enforces what that culture perceives as the limits governing acceptable behavior for one sex as opposed to the other.

Consequently, one might come to regard gender roles as a stifling network of codification that reduces one's existence to the level of culturally

determined conduct. Stephen Greenblatt notes, however, that "if culture functions as a structure of limits, it also functions as the regulator and guarantor of movement. Indeed the limits are virtually meaningless without movement; it is only through improvisation, experiment, and exchange that cultural boundaries can be established" (229). This paradox of cultural constraint and mobility, to borrow Greenblatt's terminology, lies at the very heart of Frost's and Hemingway's respective interest in gender roles.

One might well ask, at the outset, "Why Frost and Hemingway? What could these two writers possibly have in common?" Although one generally associates Frost with backwoods New England and Hemingway with expatriate France and the Spanish bullring, similarities exist both in their works and their biographies. For instance, both writers' early works were published largely through the influence of Ezra Pound, and they returned the favor by collaborating in the successful movement for his release from St. Elizabeth's mental hospital in 1958. Furthermore, both writers were exquisite craftsmen, though their subtle mastery of the English language differs significantly from the conspicuously modern experiments of T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. Like Eliot and Joyce, both Hemingway and Frost are intensely allusive writers, yet the oblique nature of their references--typically to folklore, Shakespeare, or the Bible--frequently escapes critical attention, perhaps because they prefer a subtle approach as opposed to the overtly allusive styles of some of their contemporaries.

The most compelling similarity between Hemingway and Frost, however, derives from their shared reliance on a carefully constructed persona as a

method of public representation. Few American writers--before or since--have ever been public figures on a par with Hemingway and Frost, and both writers' celebrity has often threatened to eclipse their monumental achievements in the field of American letters. Critics since Lionel Trilling and Carlos Baker have articulated the numerous inconsistencies between the common views of Hemingway as the archetypal misogynist or Frost as the consummate grandfather-figure and the contrary evidence found in their collected works, endeavoring to create a more sensitive audience for the work of these American masters, yet such a theory's reception in the field of gender studies has been hesitant, at best.

Gender is merely an attribute, rather than the single determining factor of one's identity, yet Hemingway and Frost both devised their own distinctly masculine personality--a public image which became progressively more important to these writer as their celebrity increased. The relationship between Hemingway's and Frost's respective biographies and works provides an unexpected forecast of Judith Butler's agency theory: "Gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (25). Thus, just as characters such as Jake Barnes or the Hill-Wife assert their own genders through individual behavior, so do Frost and Hemingway create complex gendered identities in the public sphere. Both writers' fame forces them to consider not only their creative output, but also their personae, as essential to the construction of a gendered self.

I argue that their works ultimately affirm the flexible nature of gender, as opposed to a constrictive male/female binary, frequently depicting characters who are aware of their own potential to create a gendered identity. Chapter One, "Choice and the Feminine Sensibility," explores the notion of a gender-influenced language, proposing that speech is governed by specifically male or female codes and assumptions. Meaningful interaction between the sexes might then seem all but impossible, and both Frost and Hemingway accordingly explore the implications of sexually determined communication through a number of works in which a woman's reaction to a climactic situation is clearly influenced by her own conception of gender identity. However, the "little boyish girl" (8) of Frost's "Wild Grapes" suggests that one's choice must not be strictly between the poles of a reductive male/female binary; rather, a sophisticated conception of the self includes the possibility of a mutable gender. The second chapter, "Marriage and 'Home,'" furthers this notion of choice in its conception of literary marriages in Frost and Hemingway, suggesting that one must relinquish a certain gendered lifestyle if one is to establish a home, and that language (as in Chapter One) is a crucial element in that equation. For instance, Nick Adams's terse conversation with his young friend George in Hemingway's "Cross-Country Snow" reflects his concern at abandoning boyish pleasures, most obviously skiing, for the world of responsibility and maturity found in his marriage and impending fatherhood. Furthermore, intimations of fame's effect upon marriage emerge in the form of the Maccombers, a society couple on safari whose utter lack of a home stands in sharp contrast to the various homes found in Frost's poetry.

This exploration of a gendered choice expressed in terms of language modulates in the third chapter, "Sexual Performance," as the very act of writing comes to the forefront of the argument. While the relatively unsophisticated characters of "Up in Michigan" and "The Subverted Flower" perform according to the potentially dangerous rubric of a traditional male/female binary, a more sophisticated conception of gender emerges through figures of the writer. Hemingway's Jake Barnes and the self-conscious lyric speakers of Frost's "Putting in the Seed" and "The Silken Tent" demonstrate that behavior and the construction of metaphor constitute the basis for gender definition. Finally, the concluding chapter examines the relationship between "Gender and the Creative Impulse," attempting to locate a correlation between these works and the writers' own ideas of gender representation. Unlike the previous chapters, which (coincidentally) each include detailed discussion of a total of five pieces, I have limited myself to one representative fiction from each writers' collected works in the hope that a narrowed scope will provide a clear insight into the complex relationship between a writer's art and his own life. In doing so, I explore the possibility that the artist figures of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" and "Paul's Wife" embody Hemingway's and Frost's own anxieties about writing gendered characters and about how their literature might relate to their decidedly masculine public images. How, then, does knowledge of the literature inform an understanding of the image, in that both are modes of public representation?

## Chapter One: Choice and the Feminine Sensibility

Both writers return to this theme of gender representation repeatedly over the course of their long careers, not only to analyze the differences between masculine and feminine perspectives, but also to examine how their characters respond to a culturally imposed order. Frost and Hemingway often depict specific moments of acute perception--episodes in which characters become aware that gender roles are defined by language, constituting a potentially restrictive method of categorization--and then explore how and why a character either accepts or denies his or her place within that system of gender-based classification. Frost's "Wild Grapes," "The Housekeeper," and "The Hill-Wife," as well as Hemingway's "Cat in the Rain" and "Hills Like White Elephants," are profoundly sympathetic to feminine sensibilities, each depicting a woman's reaction to what she perceives as her culturally assigned role. Do these women choose their own fates, and if so, how does language influence their respective decisions? The women of "The Housekeeper" and "The Hill-Wife" leave their husbands, whereas those of "Cat in the Rain" and "Hills Like White Elephants" do not. The emerging consciousness of gendered identities occasions a variety of responses, perhaps best seen in the retrospective narrative, "Wild Grapes."

Robert Frost's "Wild Grapes" (*New Hampshire*, 1923) commands a unique position within his collected works: it is one of precious few Frost poems in which a young girl dominates the narrative. While Frost's interest in and sympathy for the feminine perspective governs a significant portion of his work, he tends to



consider older, often married, women's experiences. The dissonant first-person narrative of "Wild Grapes" suggests such an older woman reflecting upon her youth, and the fact of retrospective narration implicitly links one's comprehension of experience to his or her use of language. Her monologue focuses almost exclusively on the experience of one childhood afternoon, and thus permits Frost the freedom to examine a child's growing awareness of the fluidity of gender characterization. According to Scott's definition, gender roles change--or perhaps more accurately, are perceived differently--as an individual matures. Consequently, in accordance with the poem's references to rebirth (14-18) and evolution (49-53), one can read "Wild Grapes" as a young girl's realization that one's identity can be defined, and therefore bound, in terms of gender.

The narrator recounts the events of an afternoon spent gathering grapes with her older brother. Only five years old, she is too young to climb birch trees as her brother does, so he bends a tree within her grasp and then turns to find another tree for himself. The narrator, however, weighs so little that the tree snaps back to an upright position before she can let go. Her brother instructs her to let go so he can catch her, yet fear and instinct prevent the speaker from relinquishing her increasingly strained grasp. Eventually he bends the tree again, lowering his sister back to earth, and jokingly recommends that she "Try to weigh something next time, so you won't / Be run off with by birch trees into space" (90-91). The narrator, however, refuses to dismiss the incident so lightly,



instead pondering its significance in terms of the formulation and recognition of gender roles.

Her carefree brother acts as a catalyst throughout, and his presence suggests a connection to "Birches" (*Mountain Interval*, 1916). In that earlier poem, a young boy masters the trees with a combination of skill and confidence; the "Wild Grapes" narrator, however, lacks his knowledge and experience and therefore cannot control her environment. This contrast--especially when coupled with the narrator's admission that, "like Eurydice" (12), she was rescued by a male--might suggest that Frost validates a form of dominant masculinity; yet the speaker's youth and the knowledge she attains both indicate a more complex reading. The narrator refers frequently to her own mysterious double nature, calling herself "a little boyish girl" (8)--the apparent contradiction suggests that both terms are inadequate signifiers--and referring to this critical day in her development as a second birthday (16), both proving that she does not yet define herself according to a traditional male/female binary.

Feminist critic Helene Cixous asserts that the entirety of human existence is defined in terms of such "dual, *hierarchized* oppositions" (91) in which the dominant characteristic assumes masculine connotations (e.g., activity/passivity, reason/emotion, etc.). The young children of "Wild Grapes," however, are not yet consciously aware of such a binary (although the retrospective speaker certainly is). Subsequently, their behavioral patterns betray a mixture of Cixous's traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics. The brother, for example, acts rationally and instructs his sister not to panic while he bends the tree back to

earth, yet he exhibits emotional qualities in his good-natured teasing (56-58) and his use of the elaborate “fox grapes” (63) metaphor. Furthermore, although Cixous’s “Culture/Nature” (91) opposition characteristically attaches feminine significance to the second term, “Wild Grapes”--like many other Frost poems--contains a *male* character with an instinctual connection to the natural world, implying that a communion with nature transcends gender limitations. Frost’s poem implies that these characters are too young to understand the significance of such culturally imposed gender roles, although the narrator’s concluding remarks suggest an emerging recognition of the gender-based binary’s existence.

Once she returns to safety, the narrator meditates upon the event’s implications, paying particular attention to the head/heart opposition Cixous mentions as part of the greater male/female binary:

It wasn’t my not weighing anything  
 So much as my not knowing anything--  
 My brother had been nearer right before.  
 I had not taken the first step in knowledge;  
 I had not learned to let go with the hands,  
 As still I have not learned to with the heart,  
 And have no wish to with the heart--nor need,  
 That I can see. The mind--is not the heart.  
 . . . nothing tells me

That I need learn to let go with the heart. (92-103)

Critic Helen Bacon points out that “not letting go with the hands teaches her to surrender to the heart” (17). The narrator recognizes that she must assimilate stereotypically masculine modes of knowledge, particularly reason (“My brother had been nearer right before”), yet this episode also paradoxically affirms her faith in “the heart” and emotional expression. Her brother’s actions and--equally important--*his words* force her to recognize the existence of a gendered binary, yet the speaker refuses to accept definition in terms of a culturally imposed order. According to Bacon, she instead “accepts the absurdities of the heart. As a result she does learn to let go with the hands--to cope with the world in her brother’s mode as well as her own” (27). Consequently, the narrator chooses to “celebrate two birthdays” (16), refusing to define herself as either traditionally masculine or feminine; her rejection of the binary proves to be an informed, admirable choice. Thus “letting go with the hands” represents the narrator’s willingness to embrace knowledge and experiences beyond the limits of a stereotypical male/female binary, a conscious decision to define herself in her own terms and through her own voice.

The American wife of Hemingway’s “Cat in the Rain” (*In Our Time*, 1925), however, is a victim of oppressive gender signification. She and her husband George are the only Americans vacationing at an Italian hotel, and a rainy afternoon spent inside reveals the strained nature of their relationship. The wife stands at the window and notices a “poor kitty out trying to keep dry” (129) in the garden below. She ventures outside to retrieve it, meeting the hotel padrone and a maid downstairs, but her search proves unsuccessful. The dejected wife

returns to the room and, unable to command her husband's attention, she vents her frustration with a list of things she claims to "want" (131)--ranging from material possessions (silver, candles, new clothes) to a desire for increased femininity (long hair)--in a tone approaching the hysterical. The story ends as the maid reappears at the door with a cat sent up by the padrone.

The American wife's earlier statement--"I want a cat. I want a cat now. If I can't have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat" (131)--implies that a cat represents the embodiment of her needs, but the situation's irony becomes clear when the maid, as if on cue, delivers a cat to the couple's room. The young woman cannot articulate her desires in anything but the vaguest terms, and her pathetic wish for a cat indicates her own inability to express herself through language. Critics have argued for years whether the maid's "big tortoise-shell" is the same cat the wife sees outside in the rain (Warren Bennett eventually proved that there are two different cats in the story), yet the point is irrelevant if one considers that the wife wants "a cat" (131, italics added), not necessarily any particular one. This tendency for vague generalizations crystallizes the most pathetic aspect of the wife's plight: her expatriate lifestyle leaves no option for choice. Can the mere appearance of a cat possibly fulfill her desires and restore her lack of femininity? Rather than improve her situation, the padrone's gesture just underscores its futility.

The wife's view of the padrone himself proves essential to a gender-based reading. Neglected by her husband, the wife reacts to the padrone as she presumably would to a suitor. For example, the padrone--polite and

professional, above all--stands and bows each time the American wife enters the lobby. At first, the wife admires "his dignity [and] . . . the way he wanted to serve her" (130), but her second response is more complex:

As the American girl passed the office, the padrone bowed from his desk. Something felt very small and tight inside the girl. The padrone made her feel very small and at the same time really important. She had a momentary feeling of being of supreme importance. (130)

The designation "girl" (introduced with the disappointment she suffers as a result of not finding the kitty) implies a sense of helplessness and an absence of decision-making power resulting from George's tendency to ignore her. (Note that his distance is repeatedly expressed in terms of his refusal to speak.) Consequently, the wife becomes anxious, and possibly even sexually aroused, by a gesture as insignificant as the padrone's professional attention--"something felt very small and tight inside . . . a momentary feeling of being of supreme importance"--and she makes a subtle sexual advance upon her return to the room, joining her husband on the bed. He continues reading, snubbing her only attempt for action, and the wife's response offers her most explicit identification with the neglected cat outside: "It isn't any fun to be a poor kitty out in the rain" (130).

Such a personal description crystallizes the wife's dissatisfaction with her marriage. She expresses her disappointment by creating a gendered metaphor, associating herself with the unfortunate feminine "kitty." Critic Thomas Strychacz notes that her emotions "combine traditionally male and female perspectives.

She wants to be rescued, but also to be the rescuer . . . preferring to experience the traditionally masculine role of self-liberation" herself (qtd. in Donaldson, 78). The American wife's confusion thus becomes emblematic of her inability to interpret her own emotions and, by extension, express them or decide upon a possible course of action. Furthermore, the padrone's gift reinforces the wife's feelings of dependency and suggests that she desires much more than a cat. Many Hemingway scholars (notably John V. Hagopian) have argued that the wife longs for a baby, often interpreting the oppressive rain as a fertility symbol reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Critic David Lodge, on the other hand, notes:

Now rain *can* symbolize fertility, when defined by opposition to drought.

In this story, however (and incidentally, throughout Hemingway's work), it is opposed to "good weather" and symbolizes the loss of pleasure and joy, the onset of discomfort and ennui. (qtd. in Benson, 64)

The rain poignantly implies a stifling malaise that underscores the story's most arresting detail: the wife does not know what she wants and therefore cannot voice her displeasure in anything but the vaguest terms. Hemingway does not use the rain to suggest tragic implications (as he later would in *A Farewell to Arms*, 1929), but to remind us that George and his wife are American tourists--possibly expatriates--and that rain thus reduces them to "tourists without tourism . . . [stripping them] of everything but the most rudimentary roles" (Donaldson, 76).

In other words, the lack of sightseeing or other similar distractions (suggested by the war monument) exposes the emptiness of their marriage, perhaps best illustrated by the couple's disagreement over the length of the woman's hair. The wife announces that she wishes to grow out her short hair, claiming "I get so tired of looking like a boy" (131). George's "I like it the way it is" (131) implies his own fear of change and the amount of control he exercises over "his wife" (the possessive form exclusively used to describe her in the story's final moments), and his callous instruction "shut up and get something to read" (i.e., do as he does) represents an explicit substitution of his actions for her desires. Her miserable acquiescence becomes all the more painful for her silence. Unable to express her dissatisfaction in anything beyond an almost meaningless list of desired objects, the wife's lack of resolve dooms her to emotional bankruptcy. The relationship seems destined to continue in like fashion as a result of the couple's inability to communicate effectively, a subject Hemingway explores brilliantly in his later story "Hills Like White Elephants" (*Men Without Women*, 1927).

The text of "Hills Like White Elephants" consists almost entirely of a conversation between an American couple as they wait for a train to Madrid. Nothing else "happens"; the narrator's infrequent interjections are generally descriptive, illustrating the train station and its surrounding landscape. On one side, there is a shaded area adjacent to the bar, overlooking "brown and dry" (211) country and a line of white hills in the distance. The Ebro River passes through "fields of grain and trees" (213) on the other side, not visible from the



shade in which the Americans are seated. Two lines of railroad tracks separate the white hills and barren earth from the fertile river valley on the station's opposite side, an appropriate division considering that the couple discusses whether the woman, Jig, should have an abortion. Neither character ever explicitly mentions the word, yet Hemingway's masterful dialogue subtly implies that the repeated "it" refers to a deliberate termination of pregnancy.

Although her lover urges her to, Jig clearly does not want to have an abortion. Their expatriate lifestyle (suggested by the numerous hotel labels covering their luggage) does not fulfill her, and she voices her dissatisfaction with a frustrated question, "That's all we do, isn't it--look at things and try new drinks?" (212). Much like the American wife of "Cat in the Rain," Jig's dialogue hints at her own feelings of emptiness and dissatisfaction, and she implies that a baby might meet her needs in that respect. The man, on the other hand, views the baby as an unwanted responsibility. Although he says repeatedly, "I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to" (213), his insistence indicates just the opposite--he considers an abortion the only solution. Similar to George, the husband from "Cat in the Rain," the man attempts to marginalize the woman's emotions.

The later story's subtle mastery of language, however, indicates that Hemingway has honed his craft and arrived at a more profound understanding of gender-based language. Pamela Smiley argues that Jig and her boyfriend suffer from "the powerless frustration of parallel interchanges . . . because [men and women] speak different languages" (qtd. in Benson, 288) while discussing the



same topic. Smiley explains, for instance, that "feminine language tends to be relationship-oriented while masculine is goal-oriented" (290). Consequently, Jig and her lover are unable to communicate effectively because each character judges the other's speech according to his or her own standards. For example, when Jig asks, "Doesn't it mean anything to you? *We could get along,*" the man responds, "Of course it does. But *I don't want anybody but you. I don't want any one else. And I know it's perfectly simple*" (214, italics added). Jig uses the plural pronoun "we" in an attempt to involve her boyfriend, a relationship-oriented tactic consistent with Smiley's notion of typically feminine speech patterns. The man, presumably unaware of the pronoun's implications, accordingly responds with the singular "I" much more commonly found in masculine language. According to Smiley, "Jig, who is feeling vulnerable and looking for reassurance, would recognize the American's singular pronoun as a direct signal that no relationship existed" (297), even though he remains ignorant of such a weighty implication. Consequently, she picks up on his unintended irony and responds, "Yes, *you know it's perfectly simple*" (214, italics added), illustrating his inability to understand her emotions and furthering the communicative distance between them.

Miscommunication not only manifests itself in evaluations and assumptions of the other's speech based on one's own gender-based expectations; often the characters attach different meanings and connotations to the same word. For example, beginning with his statement, "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig. It's not really an operation at all" (212), the man uses the

word "it" 26 times (nearly twice as many times as Jig), almost always in reference to the abortion. Jig's use of the same word, however, remains much more complex. Beginning with her desperate question, "But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?" (213), Jig uses the word "it" in reference to their relationship, the unborn baby, and life in general, as well as to the act of abortion.

The man's single-mindedness prevents him from addressing such a list of concerns. He only wishes that their relationship could return to the way it was before they discovered her pregnancy (which Jig recognizes as an impossibility), and weakly declares, "We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before" (212). The man attempts to co-opt Jig's use of the first-person plural, yet he refuses to accept the drastic implications of their situation, and he quickly returns to the singular form with a succession of supercilious "I know"s (213). Whether his speech represents a state of denial or naiveté is uncertain, but his use of the word "fine" highlights a crucial difference between the two characters. For the man, the word represents the easy, carefree lifestyle they indulged in before, and his sole desire is that Jig have the abortion so that their life can go back to such a state. Jig, however, observes the word's empty descriptive quality and, as a result, often uses it ironically. Unfortunately, her companion is either unable or unwilling to interpret her loaded statement, "I'll do it and then everything will be fine" (213), and he fails to respond sympathetically. According to critic Robert Paul Lamb, "such a response is beyond him. It would entail a capacity to see the world through her eyes and not just his own" (471).

Yet again, one encounters characters who suffer from an inability to see beyond their gender limitations. The man, for example, either does not detect or is unable to interpret the significance Jig attaches to the distant hills, reminiscent of George's failure to understand his wife's wish for a cat. A gender-linked study of speech patterns suggests that Hemingway's women are more given to metaphorical language than are his men, and Jig's early observation, "They look like white elephants" (211), emphasizes her adherence to Smiley's typically feminine speech patterns. (Critics have argued extensively over the meaning of the "white elephants" simile, though John Hollander's specification of "an unwanted possession" [quoted in Smith, 208], seems most appropriate.) The lover plays his part correctly by deflating her metaphor with fact, replying, "I've never seen one" (211). Retreating to the shelter of his experience, the man's denial suggests that he does not possess the imagination Jig does, unconsciously acknowledging the presence of the reason/emotion binary at work in "Wild Grapes" and explaining his continued wish that their relationship remain static. When opposed to the fertile valley on the train station's opposite side, the white hills come to represent sterility and existential nothingness. The imagery remains ambiguous throughout: while the Americans sit on the barren side drinking and gazing at the white hills, the fact that their train will arrive on the valley side prevents the reader from drawing a simple conclusion about their relationship's outcome.

The woman's last statement, "There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine" (214), provides the only hint of resolution. Jig retreats to her previous position of

deference and dependence, asking her lover to translate for her and smiling as he plays the role of devoted boyfriend while carrying their suitcases. That curious smile prevents the scene from deteriorating into a pathetic moment of defeat, instead indicating Jig's newfound confidence. She realizes that presumably resuming stereotypical gender roles is the only way to end (or at least postpone) the argument, a gesture the man will almost surely interpret as indicating her compliance with his wishes. However, Jig again uses the word "fine" ironically, implicitly suggesting the man's lack of understanding. Her last speech hints that she has arrived at an unspecified decision--perhaps "There's nothing wrong with me" marks a newfound acceptance of her pregnancy--and that, if nothing else, she has gained the ability to interpret the man's gender-coded speech (suggesting an emergent power within the relationship) while still retaining her own identity.

Just as the American wife and Jig can be seen as representative of the young female expatriates found throughout the Hemingway canon, so can one regard the title character of Frost's "The Hill-Wife" (*Mountain Interval*) and Estelle, the common-law wife of his earlier poem "The Housekeeper" (*North of Boston*, 1914), as typical of the rural wives so often encountered in Frost's collected works. Unlike the American wife or Jig, however, Frost's women both choose to abandon their respective relationships, and this act of choosing manifests itself as the crucial factor indicating each writer's understanding of the feminine sensibility as it relates to his own particular aesthetic. For instance, the American wife does not know what she wants except in the vaguest terms, and

therefore cannot even express the malaise her marriage inspires, much less choose an appropriate course of action. If Jig's mysterious resolve and implied power, on the other hand, suggest her role as the potential feminine embodiment of Hemingway's oft-quoted "grace under pressure" maxim (qtd. in Lynn, 343), how then do the decisions of Estelle and the Hill-Wife function within Frost's world?

Many of his poems (as in Hemingway's fiction) dwell upon the issues of acceptance and endurance in the face of hardship and uncertainty, beginning with his early lyric "The Trial by Existence" (*A Boy's Will*, 1913) and continuing through such masterpieces as "After Apple-Picking" (*North of Boston*) and "Directive" (*Steeple Bush*, 1947). Consequently, the act of choosing gains a significance in and of itself. Noted Frost scholar Richard Poirier argues that this potential for conscious decision constitutes, for Frost, the basic distinction between human beings and animals. Furthermore, the negative implications of a seemingly affirmative resolution--such as a wife's departure from an unhappy marriage--become much more apparent when the distant, metaphysical world of the aforementioned poems is replaced by the very immediate, personal one of "The Housekeeper" or "The Hill-Wife."

One might argue that these women perform admirably in freeing themselves from their stifling domestic situations, but such a reading remains valid only up to a point. Neither the Hill-Wife's husband nor John Hall of "The Housekeeper" are bad husbands in an abusive or consciously neglectful sense. Their fault, according to Lawrence Thompson, "is not so much misunderstanding

as not understanding enough" (118), clearly a failure of linguistic interpretation. No textual evidence exists to suggest that either man has ever been confronted with an outburst like the American wife's in "Cat in the Rain"; even Estelle's mother notes offhandedly, "But Estelle don't complain" (117). The same might be true of the Hill-Wife, who couches her profound loneliness in a short metaphorical speech (presumably to her husband) on the ironic "care" (l.:1,3,5) they express for the birds whose coming in the spring relieves them of their marriage's monotony.

The Hill-Wife's language in that lyric should remind one of Jig's gender-coded use of similes in "Hills Like White Elephants," and the poem's structure reflects an appropriate concern for her emotions, rather than a strictly factual account of the marriage's breakdown. Frost forsakes his more common narrative mode, instead creating "an implied dramatic narrative" (Thompson 117) by arranging five short lyrics--two of which are her own first-person accounts--under the title "The Hill-Wife." The woman of the title expresses dissatisfaction because her life is defined solely in terms of domesticity, thereby limiting her sense of femininity: "Since there were but two of them, / And no child, / And work was little in the house, / She was free" (V.: 3-6). The ironic "free" recalls Jig's "fine," since this liberty affords no more than the opportunity to wander aimlessly behind her husband, singing--like Ophelia--to herself.

Considered as a whole the sequence presents the portrait of a woman brought to the brink of madness by a heightened awareness of fear and loneliness through gendered language, who then finally manages to escape her

empty marriage. "The Oft-Repeated Dream" represents a crucial stage in the Hill-Wife's psychic deterioration, illustrating her fear that a "dark pine" (2) outside their bedroom window would break through the wall and commit some unspeakable act of violence. The lyric's ballad stanzas imply that the Hill-Wife has forsaken reality for the fantastic realm of troubadors and storytellers, and the spondees used in describing the tree create an air of menace:

. . . the *dark pine* that kept . . . (2, italics added)

. . . Made the *great tree* seem as a little bird . . . (7, italics added)

She no longer acknowledges the pathetic fallacy as she does in the earlier "Loneliness," and the unstressed syllables of frequent anapestic and pyrrhic feet suggest the ever-growing distance between the Hill-Wife and her husband, mentioned explicitly in the line "Only one of the two / Was afraid" (10-11).

The Hill-Wife's vivid imagination clearly allies her with Jig, yet her vague feelings of "loneliness" and failure to articulate them suggest a much closer affinity to the less sympathetic American wife of "Cat in the Rain." Furthermore, the utter lack of information about the husband--he only appears twice--actually *prevents* the reader from applauding the Hill-Wife's decision to abandon her marriage. Frost's use of the plural "they" in "House Fear" suggests that the husband also feels uneasy upon returning to their darkened home, although his apprehension does not escalate to the fear the Hill-Wife exhibits throughout the cycle. Again, the gender binary asserts itself in terms of logic and imagination, informing two different interpretations of the same situation. A striking shift occurs in the last two stanzas, however, and the reader learns just how deeply



the Hill-Wife's departure affects her husband. Her abandonment devastates him (27-28), and the speaker subtly criticizes her impulsive decision by opening the final stanza with a trochee: "*Sudden* and swift and light as that / The ties gave" (25-26), an image that looks forward to "The Silken Tent." Frost ends "The Hill-Wife" with characteristic ambiguity--accenting the situation's unresolvable nature--as the reader simultaneously endorses the woman's determination while reproaching her for the ruin her impetuous decision causes.

"The Housekeeper" remains far less problematic, particularly because of the narrative's contrasting treatment of damage in the wake of desertion. First of all, Estelle's decision to leave appears anything but rash; her mother quotes John Hall's proverbial "Better than married ought to be as good / As married--that's what he has always said" (81-82), indicating that the subject of marriage has been mentioned numerous times during their fifteen year relationship, consistently resulting in John Hall's irrational refusal (90-91). The mother theorizes that, without Estelle's influence, his "helpless" (156) nature will rear its ugly head and bring about the ruin of the already struggling farm:

If he could sell the place, but then, he can't:

. . . It's too run down. This is the last of it.

What I think he will do, is let things smash.

He'll sort of swear the time away. He's awful!

I never saw a man let family troubles

Make so much difference in his man's affairs. (48-54)



One might regard the mother's speech as indicative of a natural tendency to favor her daughter, yet when John Hall later enters the house without unhitching his horse and wagon, one realizes the accuracy of her portrait of the man as irresponsible and uncommunicative. Consequently, her familiar tone appears intimate rather than spiteful, and the neighbor's masculinity (206) implies that such gossipy speech does not exist merely as a feminized form of communication (Kilcup 110).

The mother's characterization of John Hall's behavior suggests that the consequences of language are implicitly linked to issues of gender. She faults his inability to separate his personal life from his livelihood (53-54), yet such conduct seems unmanly in the sense that it is immature, rather than a mere failure to provide. Estelle's mother lists details--e.g., "John's no threatener / Like some menfolk" (68-69) and "He knows he's kinder than the run of men" (80)--that, although they may indicate her own tendency to speak in terms of gender stereotypes, prevent one from reading John Hall as a stereotypical character through her use of comparative statements. Instead, Frost expresses John Hall's lack of manhood through his foolish nature--a lack of reason and a failure to make decisions--expressed in terms of both his business and his private life. Although "year in, year out, he doesn't make much" (103), John never accepts the generous offers for his prize chickens (138-141) which would certainly lighten the workload around the farm or help pay off the mortgage.

John Hall instead prefers to keep superficially "nice things" (116) without the pressure inherent in commitment, a weakness that Estelle can no longer

abide. Presumably, Estelle becomes fed up with his tendency to shirk the marriage issue and takes matters into her own hands, leaving the farm in order to marry another man. While her departure does contain a hint of pride, it is far more importantly a conscious decision based upon years of experience. Unlike the Hill-Wife's almost frenzied escape, Estelle's action becomes a gesture of empowerment, a repudiation of Cixous's criticism: "Either the woman is passive; or she doesn't exist" (92). John Hall mutely expresses his frustration by carelessly throwing his hoe (a symbol of cultivation) into a nearby apple tree (a typically Frostian emblem for knowledge), implying his ultimate inability to comprehend Estelle's decision (60-62).

The failure to articulate sympathy for the feminine sensibility thus proves a major flaw for the men in these works, ranging from the devastating pathos of the Hill-Wife's husband to the repugnant passivity of George in "Cat in the Rain"; from John Hall's refusal to make a choice to the man's shameful attempts to manipulate Jig in "Hills Like White Elephants." Consequently, the women are forced to consider their own powers of will, whether they be manifest in Jig's quiet dignity and Estelle's affirmative withdrawal, or relatively absent as in "The Hill-Wife" and "Cat in the Rain." Perhaps the bravest, most effective decision of all remains the "Wild Grapes" narrator's ultimate rejection of the male/female binary itself. She recognizes that reason and emotion each carry a specific gender significance, yet her words indicate a refusal to accept that either/or binary. Rather, she acts and speaks according to her own will, choosing to repudiate the overarching dilemma of gendered language.

## Chapter Two: Marriage and "Home"

The early twentieth century ushered in an age of increasing enfranchisement for American women unlike any ever before seen. In 1920, women earned the right to vote when Congress ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, an undeniable recognition of changing gender relationships in cultural and political spheres. The "flapper" became the archetypal symbol of feminine independence in the 1920s; at the same time, divorce rates increased rapidly, virtually doubling between 1900 and 1920 (Collins 239). Sociological theorists JoAnna Stephens Mink and Janet Doubler Ward contend that Americans "define our existence--perhaps our very identity--through our marital status . . . not only as individuals but also as a society" (1). Hemingway, who came of age during this period, and Frost--a generation older, but no less interested--wrestled with the implications of this changing social order throughout their careers and (perhaps somewhat less successfully) in their personal lives.

Both writers repeatedly turn to the institution of marriage in their art, often exploring its cultural significance in relation to the concept of "home." Neither writer longs for a return to an unobtainable Victorian ideal, though; on its most basic level, "home" means an atmosphere of mutual love and respect as opposed to one of oppression and resentment. The majority of Frost's and Hemingway's collected works, such as "Home Burial" and "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife," suggest that such an environment remains difficult--if not impossible--to attain. The marital relationship's significance resides in the

character's decision to relinquish a certain lifestyle in the process of establishing a home.

Many readers, both critical and casual alike, blindly assign autobiographical significance to Hemingway's fiction, particularly to the series of stories Carlos Baker assembles under the simplistic heading "Hemingway's marriage-group" (*Writer*, 137). Without question, Ernest Hemingway was a man who possessed an almost insatiable lust for experience (ranging from women to drink to bullfighting and big-game hunting, to name just a few of his more notorious pursuits), yet those critics who reduce the man's work to nothing more than a poorly disguised version of his autobiography do Ernest Hemingway *the writer* a great disservice. Considering the reading of "Cat in the Rain" in the previous chapter, for example, one can hardly agree with Baker's dismissive, "It was about himself and Hadley [Hemingway's first wife] and the manager and chambermaid at the Hotel Splendide" (*Life*, 107). While the Hemingway myth--which emerged in no small part because of his own efforts--remains inescapable, one cannot allow his celebrity to dominate one's appraisal of Hemingway's relentlessly meticulous art.

A similar concern has become increasingly significant in the field of Frost studies. Critics since Lionel Trilling have been hell-bent on destroying the widespread image of Robert Frost as a lovable grandfather figure, the New England sage writing nature poems by the fireside. And rightly so. No sophisticated reader can possibly ignore the presence of what Trilling terms the "terrifying" (qtd. in Meyers, 318) in the poet's major work, and--although the

resistance is not nearly as great as in the case of Hemingway--there exists a controversy concerning the separation of the artist from his product, fueled by recent revelations concerning the darker side of his own personality. While both Frost and Hemingway almost certainly sought to express their own deepest emotions through literature, the profundity and universal quality present throughout their collected works defy a simplistic autobiographical interpretation.

Perhaps no one character in the entire Hemingway canon has received more biographically-related attention than Nick Adams, the young American whose presence dominates *In Our Time* and who often reappears in subsequent short stories. Although Nick's youthful episodes in Michigan and later involvement in World War I were definitely inspired by Hemingway's own experiences, he does not function as a strictly autobiographical figure any more than do, say, Nick Carraway in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) or Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Rather, Hemingway creates an undoubtedly realistic character and elevates him to the status of modern Everyman. Consequently, since "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" suggests Hemingway's reactions to his parents' marriage, and "Cross-Country Snow" may have been inspired by his anxiety regarding Hadley's first pregnancy (just as Frost's "Home Burial" was probably born out of the grief which attended the death of his son Elliott), one must consider the complex relationship between an artist's fiction and his biography--a sense of loss and regret that one often finds in Hemingway's and Frost's "marriage tales."

## I.

While preparing *In Our Time* for publication, Hemingway placed "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" between "Indian Camp" and "The End of Something," a decision which has prompted most critics to read the former story as another episode in what Baker terms "The Education of Nicholas Adams" (*Writer*, 127). While the poignant concluding moment between father and son obviously deserves attention, the story focuses on a pair of humiliating incidents in Dr. Henry Adams's life as he retreats first from the lake shore and Dick Boulton's threats of violence to his summer cottage, and then from the cottage and his wife's overbearing presence to the nearby woods with his son Nick. The story's parallel structure suggests that one should regard his failure to stand up to Boulton as an extension of his emasculating marital situation.

The preceding "Indian Camp" depicts the doctor's skill as a physician, yet he knows that his education and surgical prowess can offer no help against Dick Boulton's brute strength, a dispiriting recognition highlighted by his subsequent irritation over the stack of unopened medical journals (75). The unread magazines signal that the doctor has lost the desire or the ability to improve his technique. Furthermore, Hemingway underscores this inadequacy by subtly shifting his mode of description: before Boulton accuses him of theft, Dr. Adams is "Nick's father" (73-74), whereas during his confrontations with Boulton and his own wife, he is exclusively referred to as the more depersonalized "doctor" (74-75). The crude sexual puns found in Boulton's name and his speech--"Don't go off at half cock, Doc" (74)--contrast his power with the doctor's weaker



constitution and represent the Indian's assumption of authority in this racially charged scene.

Dick Boulton, "a half-breed" (73), not only possesses the strength of a savage but manages to beat the white Dr. Adams in more civilized terms as well. After Boulton accuses him of stealing the "timber" (74), Dr. Adams attempts to brush off the incident by renaming it "driftwood" (74). Boulton counters cleverly, washing a log so as to discern its owner's mark, and he uses this "textual evidence" to establish irrefutable proof that the logs belong to someone, regardless of whether that owner intends to retrieve or abandon them (Strong 37). (The racial implications are further suggested by the company's name: "White and McNally" [74].) Dr. Adams's reddened skin contrasts with Boulton's light skin--"many of the farmers . . . believed he was a white man" (73)--as the authority inherent in racial distinctions becomes inverted. The racially mixed Boulton commands knowledge as well as physical power, using language and legality--presumably the "'tools'" (74) of white men--to unman the doctor.

Dr. Adams's humiliation does not end with Dick Boulton's taunts, though. Entering the house, the aggravated doctor is in no mood for his wife's aphoristic sermonizing. She lies in bed "with the blinds drawn" (75), and her darkened bedroom takes on a rather womblike quality, an image of female sexuality that balances the overt phallic references throughout the story's first half (Smith 65). It is a womb, however, both the father and the son will eventually reject. Like so many married couples in Hemingway's fiction, Dr. and Mrs. Adams are unable to communicate in any but the most rudimentary terms, their personal distance

highlighted by the fact that they keep separate rooms. The doctor resents his wife's questioning and offers only the shortest possible answers while cleaning his shotgun, sitting on the bed and pumping shells in and out in an obviously onanistic gesture. Hemingway places two crucial descriptive phrases opposite each other--"He was very fond of [the gun]. Then he heard his wife's voice from the darkened room" (75)--implying that the shotgun represents the doctor's willful substitution for speaking with his wife. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, failure to communicate remains one of Hemingway's signs of a failed marriage.

Nick also rejects his mother, his refusal to speak with her echoing his father's similar act of abandonment. In addition, Mrs. Adams's use of the third person--she refers to herself as "his [Nick's] mother" (75)--denotes her own deliberate withdrawal from her husband and son, a distance highlighted by the concluding meeting between Dr. Adams and Nick. Hemingway establishes the connection by describing Nick from his father's perspective: Nick does not just sit in the woods--"*He found* Nick sitting with his back against a tree, reading" (76). Furthermore, after Nick rejects his mother and chooses his father, Dr. Adams ceases to be "the doctor," for the narrative reassumes the earlier affectionate term "father" (76) as they leave to find the black squirrels. Howard L. Hannum notes both that animal's status as an endangered species in the early part of the century and the "belief among hunters that one male squirrel attacked another by biting his testicles. Thus, within the story, Dr. Adams recognized in the black squirrel a symbol of the displaced and 'castrated' male" (45). Hannum suggests the animal's importance yet misplaces its significance, since Nick--not Dr.



Adams--introduces the black squirrel into their conversation. Consequently, the pathos of Dr. Adams's situation is conveyed through Nick's realization of his father's loss of manhood.

Whether Nick has seen or heard either or both of the story's parallel incidents remains immaterial because he recognizes accurately his father's need for male companionship. The events depicted in "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" are almost certainly not isolated incidents; Nick would have noticed by now the strain present in his parents' marriage, especially considering such an obvious detail as separate bedrooms in their summer home. Although knowledge of the black squirrel's symbolic implications remains beyond the young Nick, he does sense his father's emasculation (the details of which become clearer in later stories such as "Now I Lay Me," as Mrs. Adams burns her husband's belongings under the pretense of "cleaning out . . . the basement" [278]). Nick rejects the stifling, womblike world of his mother in favor of an adventure in the "cool" (76) woods with his father. His reaction to the choice between masculine and feminine realms will become much more complex in "Cross-Country Snow."

Hemingway depicts the tension between spheres of masculinity and femininity far more subtly in "Cross-Country Snow" (*In Our Time*) than he does in "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife." Gone are the overt phallic references, and although a trace of boyish sentimentality occasionally appears in Nick's and George's speech, such emotion can be forgiven considering the characters' youth. On vacation in the Swiss Alps, Nick Adams and his younger friend

George stop for a drink the afternoon before George's return to college. They both regret adulthood's inevitable approach, and the world of unwanted obligations becomes explicitly feminized in the figure of Nick's pregnant wife Helen. Nick and Helen must return to their American home to have their baby, yet neither one wants to leave Europe. This is not to say, however, that Nick resembles the man of "Hills Like White Elephants"; unlike the latter character, Nick wants his wife to have their baby. George asks, "Are you glad [that Helen is pregnant]?" (146), and Nick's response, "Yes. Now" (146), suggests a conscious attempt to accept the responsibility of parenthood, especially when opposed to his earlier dismay.

Nick fears that marriage and fatherhood will entail a potential loss of masculinity. He does not necessarily foresee a henpecked existence similar to his father's, but he definitely fears the loss of simple pleasures like skiing with George. Skiing becomes--much like hunting or fishing in other Hemingway stories--the apotheosis of masculine camaraderie, an activity threatened by Nick's impending fatherhood. Thus, by extension, Nick sees the institution of marriage as limiting his possibilities. He interprets the acceptance of marital and parental obligations as a potential loss of personal liberties. Hemingway dramatizes the protagonist's predicament by describing the introductory skiing passage in a wonderfully nuanced language of tension:

His skis started slipping at the edge and he swooped down, hissing in the crystalline powder snow and seeming to float up and drop down as he went up and down the billowing khuds [hills]. He held to his left and at the

end, as he rushed toward the fence, keeping his knees locked tight together and turning his body like tightening a screw brought his skis sharply around to the right in a smother of snow and slowed into a loss of speed parallel to the hillside and the wire fence. (144)

This passage moves with a skier's rhythm, quickly gaining speed with the first sentence's sibilant undulations. Numerous descriptive present participles like "slipping," "billowing," and "tightening" suggest the present tense, yet Hemingway depicts action in the past tense: "swooped," "rushed," and "slowed." The constant tense shifts add the physical sensation of "seeming to float up and drop down" through the snow while also indicating precisely Nick's inner turmoil. This masterful mingling of tenses illustrates the protagonist's anxiety far better than his own speech does, presenting a man simultaneously clinging to boyish excitements while anticipating adulthood. As Nick slows and turns beside the fence, the prose itself thickens with lengthening vowel sounds and tongue-twisting consonance in phrases such as "smother of snow" or "slowed into a loss of speed." Thus, one cannot help but agree with George when he claims that skiing is "too swell to talk about" (145).

The word "swell" soon reappears, but the adjective's meaning shifts because of its context within the story's feminine sphere: "The girl came in and Nick noticed that her apron covered *swellingly* her pregnancy. I wonder why I didn't see that when she first came in, he thought" (145, italics added). "Swell" is no longer synonymous with "good"; now the word describes a pregnant woman's enlarged midsection, reminding Nick of his own unborn child. One could argue

that in the context of apposed masculine and feminine matrices Nick's failure to notice the swelled belly implies a Freudian inability to recognize that which he longs to deny, yet the case becomes far more complex when one considers that the waitress appears unmarried (an insight, not coincidentally, that Nick provides). He dismisses the waitress flippantly--"Hell, no girls get married around here till they're knocked up" (145)--betraying his own selfish preoccupation; such an obvious failure to sympathize undercuts Nick's attempt to come to terms with his own situation.

"Cross-Country Snow" abounds with such contradictions, highlighting further Nick's unresolved nature. Gerhard Pfeiffer and Martina Konig theorize that "Nick's failure to notice that he and George have left without paying seems indicative of a wish to escape domestic entanglements," especially considering that he neglects to pay the pregnant waitress (100). While such an ironic reading does seem attractive and justified, one must also recognize Nick's emerging maturity. He refuses to make a childish pact with George, and the narrative's concluding shift to Nick's perspective underscores the growing distance between them:

"There isn't any good in promising," he said.

They opened the door and went out. It was very cold. The snow had crusted hard. The road ran up the hill into the pine trees.

They took down their skis from where they leaned against the wall in the inn. Nick put on his gloves. George was already started up the

road, his skis on his shoulder. Now they would have the run home together. (147)

The older man lags behind, and the word "now" (147) deliberately recalls Nick's earlier statement that "now" (146) he is happy about the pregnancy. This separation between the college boy and the married man manifests itself throughout the inn scene, first with respect to George's adverse reaction to the wine Nick (the more developed of the two) selects, then second--and more important--when Nick answers George's questions about his marriage to Helen with a simple, dismissive "I don't know" (146). Nick, the married man, realizes that his young, inexperienced companion could not possibly understand the intricacies of marriage and the significant decision he, Nick, confronts.

Although Nick cannot fully comprehend this most complex of social institutions, he does not fail to recognize its value. He regrets that he and George will probably never go skiing together again, sensing his own quickly fading youth in the comparatively carefree younger man. Their conversation even seems strained at times with its clipped answers and repetitions (e.g., "That's the way it is" [146]), and Nick realizes that it might be time for him to move on, time to accept that feminized world of responsibilities. He is no Falstaff holding court at the inn after his time has passed, and Hemingway's concluding use of the word "home" proves crucial at this point. The word appears only twice in this story, at first apparently referring to wherever Nick and George are staying: "They were fond of each other. They knew they had the run back home ahead of them" (145). Hemingway undercuts any notion of the men's "home,"

however, by immediately noting their dwelling's temporary nature as Nick asks George when he will be returning to college. Although the vacationing Nick and George are returning "home," Nick will soon abandon that temporary dwelling for the lasting home of his family, choosing marriage and fatherhood over the superficial pleasures of skiing. Thus, as Nick watches George walk ahead of him in the story's concluding moments, he might just as well be thinking of his actual home in the United States, the dwelling that his family will make a permanent home. Nick Adams leaves behind the ephemeral world of masculine pleasure, seeking instead the fulfillment of permanence in the form of marriage and family.

## II.

Sometimes, though, the home degenerates into a battlefield, a confining space in which husband and wife turn against one another. Frost's "Home Burial" (*North of Boston*) presents such a home--a marriage brought to the breaking point following a child's death as husband and wife are forced to address life's very impermanence. Richard Poirier writes:

Frost's poetry recurrently dramatizes the discovery that the sharing of a "home" can produce imaginations of uncontrollable threat inside or outside. "Home" can become the source of those fears from which it is supposed to protect us; it can become the habitation of that death whose anguish it is supposed to ameliorate. . . . the pressure is shared by a husband and wife, but once again the role of the husband is ambiguous. Though he does his best to comprehend the wife's difficulties, he is only



partly able to do so. The very title of the poem means something about the couple as well as about the dead child buried in back of the house. It is as if "home" were a burial plot for all of them. (123-124)

The poet hints at the couple's remarkably different reactions before they even speak, the largely descriptive first stanza immediately suggesting a gender-based reading with its exclusive use of the impersonal pronouns "he" and "she":

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs  
 Before she saw him. She was starting down,  
 Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.  
 She took a doubtful step and then undid it  
 To raise herself and look again. He spoke  
 Advancing toward her: "What is it you see  
 From up there always?--for I want to know."  
 She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,  
 And her face changed from terrified to dull. (1-9)

It is significant that the husband speaks his wife's proper name twice during the course of the poem, while she addresses him strictly as "you," her scornful tone transforming the pronoun from potentially intimate to accusatory. With a dramatist's skill, Frost manipulates the husband's and wife's respective positions on the staircase to suggest much about their characters, particularly the wife's fear of her husband.

The staircase is the first of three major objects in "Home Burial" that embody this marriage's precarious state, the others being the door and the

fence. The wife, Amy, stands at the top of the stairs and stares out the window, but the reader does not yet know what she sees. Frost withholds that information until the unnamed husband realizes it himself, one of many subtle gestures designed to heighten the narrative's ambiguous stance. The husband spies her and begins to "mount" (11) the staircase, the pun implicitly linking menace and sexuality--a connection later cemented when the husband compares the child's gravesite to "a bedroom" (25). Whether their sex life has suffered remains tangential material; the husband's movements carry a threat of sexual intimidation. Although one feels empathy for the husband's thwarted attempts at communication, he ultimately resorts to threatening language--"If--you--do! . . . I'll follow and bring you back by force. I *will!*--" (114-116)--which prevents the reader from completely sympathizing with his character.

Frost treats Amy in similar fashion, simultaneously finding pathos in her grief and a contemptible selfishness in her refusal to communicate with her husband. For instance, her husband wants Amy to stay and share her grief with him, but "her fingers moved the latch for all reply" (44), her silence a rejection of her husband's worthy attempts at reconciliation. Lawrance Thompson finds a powerful symbol in the "door that is neither open nor shut. The wife cannot really leave; the husband cannot make her really stay. The talk *is* all, in the sense that neither husband nor wife is capable of conclusive action, of liberating either himself or the other" (223). Thompson makes a valid point, yet he characteristically misses one major detail: if either the husband or the wife were to commit a "conclusive action," the tone of the poem would change drastically,



thereby destroying its marvelous ambiguity. Amy is not Estelle of "The Housekeeper"; many readers would condemn her escape as a selfish abandonment reminiscent of "The Hill-Wife." Conversely, if the husband were to restrain his wife physically, then the reader's disgust at the husband's brutality would undermine his return to daily life and redemptive work.

The husband actually inter his own son--an extremely traumatic experience, surely--and the wife recalls the burial in great detail:

"I saw you from the window there,  
 Making the gravel leap and leap in air,  
 Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly  
 And roll back down the mound beside the hole.  
 . . . Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice  
 Out in the kitchen . . .  
 You could sit there with the stains on your shoes  
 Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave  
 And talk about your everyday concerns." (74-86)

The hypnotic rhythm and repetitions clearly signal the wife's obsessive nature, her words implying "there is something transcendent--leaping and light, airy--in his labor, while her own 'labor,' her literal creativity, is lost when her son dies" (Kilcup 71). Furthermore, her constant position at the window denotes her conscious withdrawal from daily life--that same life her husband tries desperately to regain--and suggests that at any time one could find her staring out that window, just as the husband did in the poem's opening lines. The work motif

reappears in the wife's speech, introducing the poem's most substantial symbol: "I can repeat the very words you were saying: / "Three foggy mornings and one rainy day / Will rot the best birch fence a man can build." / Think of it, talk like that at such a time!" (91-94)

The fence image resonates with meaning and provides a clear analogue to Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." The married couple of "Home Burial" derive different meanings from the same apparently innocuous statement about the fence in ways remarkably similar to the different significance Jig and the man attach to the hills. The husband's remark about the fence represents his own effort to rebuild the life shattered by his son's death with, perhaps subconsciously, a reference to their increasingly divisive marriage. His speech approaches the figurative while still placing the emphasis on redemptive physical labor, suggesting an endeavor to bridge the gender-based language barrier the man of "Hills like White Elephants" is unable to confront. However, Amy's decidedly metaphorical interpretation relates the decaying fence to the biological fact of their son's decomposing body--"What had how long it takes a birch to rot / To do with what was in the darkened parlor? / You *couldn't* care!" (95-97)--and aligns her with Jig in terms of a feminine imagination.

The similarities between these compelling women do not end there. Who can read Amy's litany of "don't"s (30) without recalling Jig's, "Would you please please please please please please stop talking?" (214)? Frost himself thought "the four 'don'ts' were the supreme thing in it" (qtd. in Meyers, 49). In both cases, the women's repetitive speech indicates a nearly identical wish that

the man would cease his invasive mode of speech, yet Frost complicates the matter by having the husband assume his wife's own words when undertaking to communicate. "Don't--don't go," he pleads. "Don't carry it to someone else this time. / Tell me about it if it's something human" (56-58). The husband uses the word "don't" seven times, yet this repetition provides the most obvious reference to her earlier speech. Although at times his speech can be manipulative or threatening, the husband sincerely wants his wife to stay, imploring "let me into your grief" (59). He even goes so far as to *remove* the implications of gender from his entreaty, terming her emotions "something human" (58) and thus implying that they can be shared between a woman and her husband.

The very nature of the wife's sorrow makes such communication impossible. Amy's denial of her husband--particularly when read in conjunction with such rhapsodic passages as ll.97-107--intimates that perhaps she finds virtue in her suffering, discovering in it an otherwise denied mode of expression. Through the poem's first 70 lines, Amy speaks only eight lines--reminiscent of Jig's relative silence--and four of them are incomplete. In general terms, the broken lines represent the spiritual and psychological distance that has grown between husband and wife since their child's death, yet there is also a subtler issue at work. During the aforementioned "don't" outpouring, Amy ironically "completes" her husband's line by silencing him. The other three broken lines (18, 43, 67) begin with Amy's short, but *complete*, sentences. Her husband does not cut her off in any one of the three cases; he merely finishes the pentameter

lines. Therefore, Amy's laconic speech personifies the lack of expression she finds in her marriage.

Still the question remains: to whom does the reader owe sympathy? Frost's dramatic form inspires an ambiguous reading, offering the couple's speech with relatively little authorial intrusion, a narrative technique often found in Hemingway's fiction, as well as Frost's narrative verse. "Home Burial" clearly presents a marriage gone awry, yet assigning blame proves problematic. The husband begs his wife to communicate, yet his masculinity frightens her into silence. The wife, on the other hand, inspires the husband's outbursts by refusing to speak and threatening to leave. Such a circular pattern implies that their situation cannot be resolved and that their "shared solitude" leaves Amy feeling as neglected and incomplete as Estelle or the Hill-Wife (Nitchie 92). Yet again, a marriage stands poised on the brink of destruction because of the couple's nearly tragic inability to communicate.

Much like "Home Burial," "In the Home Stretch" (*Mountain Interval*) begins with a wife staring out the window, yet Frost's contrasting treatment of the "home" ideal infuses the latter poem with quite a different tone. Whereas the former poem's title suggests the child's death as an emblem of that home's disintegration, the latter poem concerns itself with the construction of a new home. Standing before the kitchen sink, as the poet thereby associates the feminine with the domestic, the wife envisions her future unfolding in the form of repetitive chores, but conversation with her husband Joe saves her from sharing Amy's despair. Numerous broken lines--especially when taken in context of the

playful "lady" banter (20-25)--invoke a sense of healthy call-and-response rather than the widening spiritual distance found in "Home Burial." The detail is almost certainly coincidental, yet the wife's attire, "her cape" and "her hat" (4), foreshadows Catherine Barkley's similar costume in Hemingway's most compelling study of "home," his novel *A Farewell to Arms*. Like Catherine, the wife "moves into association with ideas of home, love, and happiness" (Baker 104), particularly in relation to images of warmth and firelight.

The wife frequently expresses her apprehension about their move to the country in terms of darkness--"lighted city streets we, too, have known, / But now are giving up for *country darkness*" (58-59, italics added), for example--and she fears the loss of worldly contact their isolation will induce. She urges her husband to call back the furniture movers to help set up the stove, indicating that producing heat and light is the first step toward establishing the comfort and concept of home (78-81). The men's "smudged, infernal" faces (even Joe's appears "blackened" from labor), could suggest the masculine menace found in "Home Burial," but their blundering and fumbling with the stove renders the scene comic. One man's offhand comment, "'It's good luck when you move in to begin / With good luck with your stovepipe'" (91-92), prefigures the contented couple's eventual retirement to the bedroom and introduces the poem's pairing of fire imagery with the erotic, a coupling the concluding stanzas will finally associate with the home ideal. The passage's sexual implications, however, become rather complex when one considers the poem's overall treatment of gender.

In blatantly Freudian terms, the stovepipe "ballooning up . . . toward the ceiling" (88-89) presumably represents the phallus and the "cannon-mouth-like hole" the vagina, but one must also remember the wife's association with the stove itself. It is she who craves the comfort of heat, she who orders the stove set upright, and she who assigns the apparatus significance as the keystone of their domesticity: "We've got to have the stove, / Whatever else we want for" (78-79). The stove's sensual connotations, therefore, become an expression of the wife's vitality rather than strictly an emblem of sexual authority. The wife's careful attention to their new home implies her continuing status as pragmatic creator, a role Amy loses when her husband buries her child. The husband and wife of "In the Home Stretch" have an adult son, Ed, yet his existence seems almost ancillary to their life together. No textual evidence exists to suggest that they are (or were) bad parents; they can, however, separate their status as man and wife from their shared role as parents, a distinction the husband of "Home Burial" forces and Amy thinks impossible.

Furthermore, unlike either Amy and her husband or Dr. and Mrs. Adams, Joe and his wife truly communicate, their often playful speech contrasting with the patronizing questions found in both "Home Burial" and "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife." Following the movers' departure, the husband notes, "It would take more than them to sicken you-- / Us of our bargain" (123-124). While such a confusion of singular and plural in "Hills Like White Elephants" or "Home Burial" would almost certainly spell disaster, this couple's relationship remains strong. The wife responds, "It's all so much / What we have always wanted"



(126-127, italics added), subtly affirming the husband's correction while placating his concerns about her apprehension.

Feminist critics might agree with Thompson when he writes, "She is glad only because he is glad. Loving him as she does she tries her best to let herself believe he wanted it as much as he" (Thompson 115), but Frost has shown himself to be far more sympathetic to feminine insight than such a reading insinuates. The wife of "In the Home Stretch," again quite similar to Catherine Barkley, finds contentment in the home as an ideal. She craves the safety it affords--the shelter from the darkness and the affection of the man she loves--not a foolish subjugation to his desires. Hers is not the loss of self that Nick Adams fears in "Cross-Country Snow"; rather it is an affirmation of self through the loving creation of a home. The wife's management of the domestic does not symbolize the whole of her character any more than the "little stretch of mowing field" does her husband's.

Unlike the decaying home-as-battefield metaphor Frost develops in "Home Burial," the home of "In the Home Stretch" is cultivated with a farmer's care. The wife's use of "stretch," especially when considered in light of the title, accentuates the constant labor required in establishing an environment of home. The poem begins with the wife staring out the window, much like "Home Burial," indicating a certain fear of just what the move from city to country will imply, and she clearly expresses her dissatisfaction in terms of a potentially stifling domesticity as she responds to her husband's question:

"What are you seeing out the window, lady?"



"What I'll be seeing more of in the years

To come as here I stand and go the round

Of many plates with towels many times. . . .

Ranks weeds that love the water from the dishpan

More than some women like the dishpan, Joe." (25-31)

Although she fears a banal, repetitive existence, she recognizes that the earth which might sprout "rank weeds" for her contains "a little stretch of mowing field for you" (32) and finds contentment in such details. Throughout the poem each achieves happiness in sacrifice and evinces genuine concern for the other's emotions, suggesting that their years together have allowed them to settle comfortably into willingly assumed gender roles, creating an environment that can truly be labeled a home.

### III.

The home, however, can appear quite static. Amy stands forever poised in the doorway at the conclusion of "Home Burial," implying an inability to escape her marriage's confining space. Although Dr. Adams might interact meaningfully with Nick in the woods, he must return home eventually, and later stories such as "Now I Lay Me" or "Fathers and Sons" indicate that his sense of alienation and emasculation only increases as his marriage continues. "In the Home Stretch" succeeds in depicting a happy home, yet the poem's nostalgic tone implies that the married couple's rewarding relationship is partly a result of their deliberate

withdrawal from society. Even Nick Adams, poised between boyhood and manhood in "Cross-Country Snow," envisions a home life already determined by his wife's pregnancy, an existence that will inevitably become defined in terms of the domestic and its feminine connotations. Only Francis and Margot Macomber seem capable of change, and their potential for growth stems directly from the fact that in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" (*The Fifth Column and the First Forty-nine Stories*) they have effectively removed themselves from the context of home.

Kenneth S. Lynn notes accurately that, "except for 'Big Two-Hearted River,' no other work of Hemingway's has been read so unrigorously so many times as 'Macomber,' and not merely because of the author's own [misleading] comments about it" (432). The safari story's marvelously ambiguous ending--in which Margot shoots her husband, prompting Wilson's accusation of murder--has led an overwhelming majority of critics to agree with Baker's assumption that Hemingway aims to dramatize "the achievement and loss of moral manhood" in "The Short Happy Life" (*Writer* 186). While certainly an important theme both in this story and in Hemingway's collected works, such a limited focus tends to downplay the importance of the Macombers' marriage. Warren Beck's groundbreaking 1955 article, "The Shorter Happy Life of Mrs. Macomber," was the first significant critical work to contest Baker's theory--shared by such eminent scholars as Edmund Wilson and Leslie Fiedler--that a power-hungry Margot murders Francis because she fears his emergent masculinity. Beck offers Robert Wilson's hypocrisy as proof against such a superficial

interpretation. Subsequent articles like James Nagel's "The Narrative Method of 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber'" (1973) and Nina Baym's "Actually, I Felt Sorry for the Lion" (1990) scrutinize Hemingway's constant yet unobtrusive manipulation of perspective, revealing the complexity and ambiguity present in the story's triangular relationship. However, while such sophisticated readings have significantly advanced the field of Hemingway scholarship, no single study has paid sufficient attention to the Macombers' status as a married couple.

Francis and Margot, members of what Wilson terms "the international, fast, sporting set" (21), have been married for eleven years, and a gossip columnist's report that they are "*on the verge*" (18, author's italics) of divorce appears quite accurate. Whether they ever loved one another seems immaterial once one considers the narrator's ironic description of their marriage as "a sound basis of union. Margot was too beautiful for Macomber to divorce her and Macomber had too much money for Margot ever to leave him" (18). Certain comments suggest, however, that the safari was meant to bring about a reconciliation between them. After his wife cuckolds him, Macomber says bitterly, "You said if we made this trip that there would be none of that. You promised" (19), and Macomber remarks to Wilson about his cowardice during the lion hunt, "I'd like to clear away that lion business, . . . It's not very pleasant to have your wife see you do something like that" (10), suggesting Macomber's need to validate his manhood in terms of his wife's viewpoint.

The lion's realistic perspective offers a spectacular counterpoint to Francis's muddled sense of developing identity. The shifting third-person limited

narration recreates the lion's confusion with reference to "the crashing thing" (13)--Macomber's gun--and records such details as "blood sudden hot and frothy in his mouth" (13) in strikingly particular language. One must note that Margot remains in the car, "about seventy-five" (13) yards from the action in Wilson's estimation. Her distance from the action prevents her from comprehending the elemental suffering of the drama that unfolds before her, and therefore she can comfortably condemn Macomber for his retreat, sarcastically referring to his cowardly action as "lovely" (9). During the buffalo hunt, however, Margot detaches herself from the relative safety provided by the motor car, and she witnesses the carnage up close. Gazing at a bull's still-bleeding carcass, she feels ill and twice expresses a wish to withdraw into the shade. The men, too wrapped up in their own performance, fail to experience Margot's profound sympathy for the animals, an emotional involvement with the hunted (rather than the masculine hunters) for which the inclusion of the lion's viewpoint prepares the reader. Unlike the vacationing Macomers, the lion is in his element and at home in the African landscape. This home, however, clearly does not provide a necessarily safe environment; it proves even more dangerous than the American society life from which the Macomers remove themselves. Although they do not suffer the pressures of home as seen in a work such as "Home Burial," the Macomers' failure to find a context in which they can relate to each other implies an insurmountable gap between masculine and feminine perspectives.

Margot's damnation of the masculine hunt becomes clear when she responds "I hated it" to her husband's question "Wasn't it marvellous, Margot?"

(25). She confronts the reality of death and suffering inherent in the safari's ritual, and it shatters her illusions about big-game hunting as the quintessential exhibition of masculine virtue. The exchange's implications become even more suggestive in light of her earlier use of the word "marvellous." While still in the car, Margot expresses sincere admiration for her husband's skill by saying, "You were marvellous, darling" (23), implying that he has finally lived up to the expectation of manly success she expresses on the first morning, "You'll kill him [the lion] marvellously" (12). Two crucial details suggest Margot's sincerity: her white face contrasts with the hypocritical Wilson's reddened face the day before, and she also uses the words "frightful" and "frightfully" (23) in relating the excitement of the hunt. Her word choice recalls her husband's earlier employment of the same word when describing the lion's roar and presents an explicit emotional association of the sort they hoped the safari would provide.

Only Margot, a conspicuous outsider in the male world of the hunt, can offer an objective evaluation of the situation. Just as the Macomber's distance from their home occasions the possibility for change in their relationship, so does her very femininity validate her assessment of her husband's masculinity. She recognizes Wilson's lack of morality--his willingness to commit adultery with his clients' wives, for example, or his illegal operation of motor cars during the hunt--and fears his emerging influence over Francis. Hunting cannot transform her husband from henpecked to heroic as she had hoped; instead, the sudden camaraderie between Macomber and Wilson indicates that her husband finds the white hunter's example appealing. This realization becomes all the more

unnerving when one considers Macomber's self-professed "hatred" (22) for the man who cuckolded him just the night before. Wilson defines masculinity in terms of wielding power over women--pitifully rationalizing his assignation with Margot by asking himself, "Well, why doesn't he keep his wife where she belongs? . . . It's his own fault" (19)--and Margot senses that Macomber will soon embrace a similar ideal, particularly in the light of such remarks as "If you don't know what we're talking about why not keep out of it?" (26). The irony is that Margot does know what they're talking about; she understands the implications of their marriage's changed status far more deeply than he does. Macomber's repressive order seems like a delayed answer to Wilson's question from earlier that morning, "Why not order her [Margot] to stay in camp?" (19), and her response--"You've gotten awfully brave, awfully suddenly" (26)--clearly iterates a criticism of Macomber's supposed manhood.

Such an argument for Margot's status as accurate observer and interpreter should in no way suggest that she must be read as an entirely sympathetic character. Warren Beck argues persuasively that she does not murder her husband, but Margot's final gesture certainly seems to be a bid for power. Recognizing that her hope for Francis's maturation has spiraled out of control, Margot fires "*at the buffalo*" (28, italics added) with a double salvation in mind. By literally saving her husband's life, Margot would figuratively save her own, reasserting her command over their relationship (an authority depicted throughout in terms of adultery and her manipulative, sarcastic speech). The phallic weapon's masculine connotations reside even in its name, Mannlicher,



and Margot's inexperience and detachment from the masculine sphere (the very quality that allows for her skill at interpretation) dooms her action. She misfires, and her husband's death represents a loss far more significant than Nick Adams's ski trips.

In attempting to work out their marital difficulties beyond the context of the home, the Maccombers have abandoned the safety such a home usually creates, an ultimately fatal decision. "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" implies that marriage--a distinctly social construction--cannot survive without the context of the home as its foundation. In "The Doctor and The Doctor's Wife" and "Home Burial," Hemingway and Frost both acknowledge the potentially damaging division the home can engender between husband and wife, but each also acknowledges that a home can be much more than a confining space. "In the Home Stretch," for example, demonstrates that a home need not be assigned gender-specific significance and can provide a meaningful sense of identity for husband and wife alike. Nick Adams anticipates (admittedly with some trepidation) creating such a home with his wife and unborn child. His most profound insight lies in the realization that if he wishes to establish a home he must first relinquish something he cherishes, and that sense of loss characterizes each of these five works, suggesting the home's inestimable value to both Hemingway and Frost.



### Chapter Three: Sexual "Performance"

If gender is, as theorist Judith Butler contends, a "cultural performance" enacted through a series of "signifying gestures" (viii), then the capacity for choice becomes essential to the active formulation of gendered identities. Butler's argument complicates the role of choice in Frost's verse and Hemingway's fiction, both as a mode of individual expression and as a necessary step in the process of creating the "home." While Foucault's devaluation of biological signifiers informs Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Butler's performative thesis re-instates the very agency Foucault denies. Butler refuses to endorse the deterministic contention that one's body remains a passive receptor for culturally inscribed signs, claiming instead that the body is "the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive *will* determines a cultural meaning *for itself*" (8, italics added).

This emphasis on performance and the individual represents an implicit refusal to define gender in strictly binary terms; rather, for Butler, gender exists *between* the twin poles of masculinity and femininity. Consequently, her argument rejects the notion of gendered absolutes in favor of a constant process of becoming. Butler develops "Nietzsche's claim in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that 'there is no "being" behind doing, effecting, becoming; . . . the deed is everything":

In an application that Nietzsche himself would not have anticipated or condoned, we might state as a corollary: There is no gender identity

behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results. (25)

Although both writers explore existence in terms of "doing," Butler's project differs from Nietzsche's in her appraisal of performance as the expression of, rather than a substitution for, identity.

A similar concept of performance as content pervades the literature of Frost and Hemingway. Characters such as the Maccombers or Estelle of "The Housekeeper" are defined largely in terms of their actions, whereas Jig of "Hills Like White Elephants" and the "Wild Grapes" narrator are characterized according to apparent contradictions between thought and deed. Both Frost and Hemingway create characters who face moments of significant moral crisis, or in Butler's terms, "the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs" (139). Examples of "gender performance" abound in the collected works of these two writers, ranging from the violent sexual act depicted in Frost's "The Subverted Flower" to the length of Lady Brett Ashley's hair in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. The respective implications vary accordingly, yet both writers share a common belief: Gender is not merely a biological matter. While Jake Barnes's war injury forces him to establish a personal definition of masculinity, less sophisticated characters--such as those of "Up in Michigan" and "The Subverted Flower"--understand sexual performance only in terms of the potentially damaging polarities of a male/female binary. Frost's lyric speakers attempt to transcend that binary through the performative construction of

gendered metaphor, a creative act indicating that one establishes his or her own sexual identity through cultural performance, thereby creating a gendered self.

The performance motif manifests itself throughout Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), most obviously in the bullfighting scenes which dominate the San Fermin festival, but the characters themselves also draw frequent attention to one another's behavior, often as a method of chastising Robert Cohn. Jake Barnes criticizes Cohn's childish chivalry, "Oh, cut out the prep-school stuff" (47), and he and Brett Ashley later discuss Cohn's conduct at length. When Jake says, "He's behaved very badly" (185), his condemnation of Cohn derives particular significance when taken in context of their group's value system. The expatriates prize one's ability to control his or her actions, a point driven home when Brett--one of the hardest drinkers among them--reproves Mike Campbell for drunkenness: "Shut up, Michael. Try and show a little breeding" (146). All of these characters have suffered through World War I, lost loved ones, or been abandoned by someone they love. Their virtue, typical in Hemingway, resides in their ability to endure, to avoid drowning in self-pity, to "behave" well. Robert Cohn's sulking, his blatant pleas for sympathy, and his shamelessly public sentimentality present a direct affront to the group's value system and earn him their unadulterated scorn.

The expatriates' obvious concern for public performance becomes one of the novel's dominant themes, generally coupled with Hemingway's exploration of

gender roles. Cohn's immature conduct, for instance, causes Jake and Brett to consider him unmanly. Brett, a keen judge of masculinity, makes an explicit comparison between Jake and Cohn, claiming that unlike Cohn, Jake "wouldn't behave badly" (185). Mark Spilka explains that one must "contrast his [Jake's] private grief with Cohn's public suffering, his self-restraint with Cohn's deliberate self-exposure" (28). While Jake's first-person narration includes moments that indicate he shares a few of Cohn's romantic emotions--alone in his room, for instance, Jake admits, "Then I thought of her [Brett] . . . and of course in a little while I felt like hell again" (42)--his characteristic reticence separates him from the weaker Cohn. In *The Sun Also Rises*, one defines gender within the public sphere, and Jake Barnes evinces a profound awareness of that fact.

Jake's acute comprehension of publicly constructed gender roles colors his description of the men with whom Brett enters in Chapter III:

A crowd of young men, some in jerseys and some in their shirt-sleeves, got out. I could see their hands and newly washed, wavy hair in the light from the door. The policeman looked at me and smiled. They came in. As they went in, under the light I saw white hands, wavy hair, white faces, grimacing, gesturing, talking. With them was Brett. She looked very lovely and was very much with them.

One of them saw Georgette and said: "I do declare. There is an actual harlot. I'm going to dance with her, Lett. You watch me."

The tall dark one, called Lett, said: "Don't you be rash."

The wavy blond one answered: "Don't you worry, dear." And with them was Brett.

I was very angry. Somehow they always made me angry. (28)

Hemingway implies that these men are homosexuals. "The suggestion," Arnold E. and Cathy N. Davidson claim, "is that the faces are pale, like the powdered faces of women; that the hands are white in contradistinction to the tanned hands of real men--the dark, leathery hands of a Basque shepherd or of the man on the billboard advertising chewing tobacco" (90). Furthermore, their "jerseys" match the "slipover jersey sweater and . . . tweed skirt" (30) worn by Brett, a woman. Jake's inverted syntax--"With them was Brett"--suggests the significance with which he endows the homosexuals' entrance and reflects his own sexual displacement: he desires Brett, but his war injury prevents him from realizing sexual fulfillment.

To Jake, homosexuality clearly constitutes a case of gender performance. Their affected, pristine appearance--"white hands, wavy hair, white faces"--and theatrical mode of speech--"I do declare. . . . Don't you worry, dear"--anger Jake because their willing disregard of female sexuality reminds him of his own inability to actualize desire. *The Sun Also Rises* frequently implies that one's desire defines one's gender. Ira Elliot misreads this scene when he concludes that the homosexuals' implicit "rupture between a culturally-determined signifier (the male body) and signified (the female gender) disrupts the male/female binary" (80), failing to note that Jake still considers himself a man even though he "has lost . . . his signifying phallus" (Elliot 83), and that his desire for Brett

derives in part from her subversion of typical sexual roles. Jake observes the homosexuals dancing with Georgette, the prostitute whom he invites to dinner merely for company, and his sexual frustration inspires "his painful confrontation with homosexuals--painful because they possess the physical ability denied to Jake but, from Jake's point of view, waste that ability" (Rudat 4), betraying the tenuous relationship between desire and performance.

Jake remains masculine in that he desires Brett, a sexually alluring woman "with curves like the hull of a racing yacht" (30), yet his war injury--which Hemingway never explicitly defines--prevents him from actualizing that desire. The homosexuals possess the physical embodiment of masculinity, yet their sexual desire for men resembles a typically feminine trait. Elliot concludes that, "Jake's sexual inadequacy and the homosexuals' gender transgression are therefore conjoined: neither can properly signify masculinity" (82). Nina Schwartz formulates a decidedly different interpretation, couching her reading in terms of Brett's promiscuity and asserting that Jake's "rage . . . results from the serious threat the homosexual man might pose to Jake's privileged relation to Brett. The homosexual is the only other male figure who might be able, like Jake, to evoke in Brett a desire that he would refuse to fulfill" (59). However, one simple fact provides a crucial distinction between Jake and the homosexuals, a difference highlighted by an apparently innocuous detail: the policeman's smile. He smiles at Jake because he assumes that Jake, too, will laugh at their foolish speech and feminized appearance, unaware that Jake experiences a painful self-recognition at their entrance. The homosexuals define themselves in the



public sphere; Jake's sexual identity is private, unknown to all but Brett and Bill Gorton.

Thus, Jake's differing public and private selves inspire his sexual anxiety throughout much of *The Sun Also Rises*. If one defines gender in a communal context, then Jake's posing behind "a potent and powerful heterosexual male" exterior (Elliot 84) represents a false front. The policeman figure returns at the novel's conclusion, though, and Jake's reaction indicates his altered viewpoint:

I settled back. Brett moved closer to me. We sat close against each other. I put my arm around her and she rested against me comfortably. It was very hot and bright . . .

"Oh, Jake," Brett said, "we could have had such a damned good time together."

Ahead was a mounted policeman in khaki directing traffic. He raised his baton. The car slowed suddenly pressing Brett against me.

"Yes," I said. "Isn't it pretty to think so?" (251)

Brett's whimsical statement recalls an earlier taxi ride in Paris (32-35), during which they kiss repeatedly and Jake voices some rather sentimental notions about love. During this ride through Madrid, however, Jake's ironic tone indicates his emerging maturity and their "comfortable" placement in the cab suggests their close friendship rather than their thwarted love affair. The "mounted policeman"--just the sort of sexual pun that delighted Hemingway--who "raised his baton" in an unknowingly mocking sign of Jake's condition signifies Jake's awareness of his own situation. Furthermore, Jake ironically says that it



would be "pretty"--the same word Brett uses earlier to express her sarcastic disapproval of Mike's behavior (185)--to assume that their lives would have been any different had he not been injured.

While Jake does not publicly proclaim his impotence--a gesture Hemingway would have regarded as shameful--his realization represents a reconciliation of his public and private selves, an insight clearly observed in his changed perception of Brett. She "is, at last, a real and discrete person, not a symbol or token or projection of himself, as she has been. . . . He sees no symbols but a suffering human being" (Vopat 98). Contrast Jake's humane understanding with Cohn's bitter view of Brett as Circe. The association of Brett with Circe--a Greek mythological woman who "usurps the traditional masculine-aggressor's role" (Cohen 295)--emphasizes Brett's rejection of "the gestures of feminine subservience for those of masculine power" (Cohen 296), but it also reduces her to a type. Jake's early lamentations over the apparently tragic inevitability of his wound serve much the same function, but in selflessly coming to Brett's aid in Madrid--"That was it. Send a girl off with one man. Introduce her to another to go off with him. Now go and bring her back. And sign the wire with love." (243)--Jake simultaneously affirms the strength of their friendship (albeit with more than a hint of bitterness) and implies that his improved understanding of their relationship reflects his own transformed definition of masculinity. Jake abandons his earlier sentimentality--the foolish romanticism that causes him to despise Cohn--in favor of the masculine dignity personified by Pedro Romero, the young Spanish bullfighter.

The bullfight, or *toreo*, is clearly an example of public performance, and the ritual itself is intensely sexual. Hemingway calls *toreo* the “Spanish institution” (8) in his bullfighting treatise *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), an ancient tradition exemplified by men such as Montoya, the *aficionado* for whom Brett’s “exposed flesh marks her as a fallen woman” (Martin 69). Montoya’s inability to comprehend modern femininity becomes quite ironic once one considers that *toreo*--the supposedly masculine art of fighting bulls--presents a remarkable mixing of genders in its performative conventions, or in Nina Schwartz’s terms, “a bizarre sexual parody”:

The bull, made to play a role of conventionally aggressive masculinity, confronts the matador in the guise of feminine seductress. The two engage in a struggle in which the “man” apparently holds the advantage, but “woman” masters her rival [the bull] by provoking his desire to master her. Here, the vulnerable passivity conventionally attributed to woman becomes her strength--her aggression, actually--against the man who goes “straight to the point” in this case, the point of the matador’s sword.

(65)

Schwartz’s reading gains particular credence if applied to the *recibiendo* technique--literally, “receiving the bull’s charge” (Josephs 91)--that Romero employs in killing his second bull during the festival’s final afternoon.

The danger and difficulty of a *recibiendo* kill derive from the matador’s minimal manipulation of the bull’s charge as Romero “drew the sword out of the folds of the muleta and sighted along the blade. The bull watched him. Romero

spoke to the bull and tapped one of his feet. The bull charged and Romero waited for the charge. . . . Then without taking a step forward, he became one with the bull, the sword was in high between the shoulders" (224). The matador remains completely exposed, facing the bull as he charges, patient and confident in his art. Romero's "purity of line" (171) becomes an emblem of his masculine dignity, yet the kill is not without its inherent femininity. Although the matador's raised sword can be interpreted as a symbolic phallus, the bull's advancing horns represent a similar masculine aggression. Romero's waiting for the charge--especially when coupled with his flashy clothes and graceful, seductive movements--suggests an air of traditionally submissive femininity, as well. Yet if Romero's "guise of femininity is associated with a certain kind of powerful aggressivity, the ritual may suggest a couple of things about the codes of patriarchal culture. That inversion indicates that the distinctions upon which the patriarchy depends are arbitrarily, or conventionally, ascribed to biological men and women" (Schwartz 67), and are therefore insufficient. Linda Wagner-Martin

Jake and Brett both perform significant actions which indicate their refusal to adhere to culturally constructed gender norms. Jake introduces Brett to Romero, a problematic decision which occasions his friend Montoya's scorn. Brett, in turn, rejects Romero because he expects her to conform to traditional gender roles. "He wanted me to grow my hair out," Brett tells Jake in Madrid. "Me, with long hair. . . . He said it would make me more womanly. I'd look a fright" (246). Because Romero belongs to a traditional society he tries to cast Brett in the mold of traditional woman, a reductive desire reminiscent of Cohn's

romantic views of Brett. Brett, however, refuses to bow to Romero's demands: "Her sexual aggressiveness is . . . unconventional: *she* chooses her lovers and she has them on *her* terms" (Cohen 296). One should not read such an act as selfish, though. Brett's commitment to her own vision of self, her own creation of a feminine identity, bespeaks her dignity--for instance, she twice refuses money from men who wish to control her (first Count Mippipopulous and then Romero), which differentiates her from Frances Clyne, Cohn's mistress, or Georgette, the prostitute. By rejecting Romero and refusing "to be one of those bitches that ruins children" (247), Brett validates her own version of femininity within the public sphere, electing to make her own decisions and construct her own social identity.

Jake's case remains more problematic: why does he "pimp" (194) for Brett? One assumes that Jake must have a significant purpose for helping the woman he loves begin a sexual relationship with another man. Spilka argues for Jake's nobility, claiming he acts "for love's sake" (35), and Linda Wagner-Martin offers a similar analysis, arguing that Jake's conduct symbolizes a test of "just how much his love--and hers--can bear" (111), yet both readings imply that Jake submits to the very romanticism he abhors in Cohn's character. Ernest Lockridge disputes such an analysis and declares that Jake performs a vengeful act "which predictably destroys Cohn" (44), an interpretation explored by Thomas Strychacz, who contends that Jake's behavior constitutes an attempt to live vicariously through Romero, drawing connections between Jake in the cafe and Belmonte in the bullring (57). Such a reading engenders an admittedly

pessimistic a view of Jake Barnes, yet the consequent focus on his role in fostering Brett's desire for Romero remains quite perceptive.

Nina Schwartz insists that Jake "authors" Brett's desire in order to expose the inadequacy of a traditional sexual relationship (59-60). One remembers that Jake constantly stresses how "good-looking" (167) Romero appears, and that at the bullfights he consistently directs her attention toward the young matador: "I had her watch how Romero took the bull away from a fallen horse with his cape, and how he held him with the cape and turned him, smoothly and suavely . . . how close Romero always worked to the bull . . . She saw why she liked Romero's cape-work and why she did not like the others" (171). Jake sells Brett on Romero, a subtle manipulation emphasized by the shift in subject from "I had her watch" to "she saw." Brett comes to see what Jake wants her to see: Romero is an attractive, dignified young man who displays unparalleled mastery of his art. By creating her desire for the matador, Jake "confronts and accepts the reality of Brett's nature and his own inability to fulfill her needs" (Nichols 325-326).

Thus, Jake subverts the performative conventions of a sexual relationship. Not content to play the part of love-slave (as Spilka asserts), Jake introduces Brett to a man who can fulfill her sexually. Realizing that he "had been getting something for nothing" (152), Jake "performs his service for Lady Ashley, performs it virtually in public" (Lockridge 43), although his behavior might not be as noble as Lockridge's terminology would suggest. By engineering the relationship between Brett and Romero, Jake paradoxically vindicates his own

personal version of masculinity. He understands Romero's place within traditional Spanish society--a culture personified by Montoya and his conventional notions of gender, a culture in which Romero admits, "It would be very bad, a torero who speaks English." (190)--and he correctly intuits that the matador's traditional concepts of gender will clash with Brett's characteristic modernity. Hence Jake can afford to be calm and ironic in San Sebastian while composing his response to Brett's telegram, for he "had expected something of the sort" (243).

Jake creates their relationship precisely because he knows that it will fail, affirming in the process his own status as Brett's "own true love" (62). Brett ultimately chooses Jake because--remarkably--he is the more complete man. Although his injury has left him impotent, Jake's ironic stance enables him to accept and understand Brett in a way that no one else in the novel can. He does not retreat to romantic dreams of what their life might have been, but ironically remarks how "pretty" (251) it would be to *think* that things could have been different. Jake's honesty is a prime example of the integrity which informs his identity; his refusal to perform in a mode antithetical to his own ideas of what constitutes a life as a man; his constant attempt to learn "how to live in it" (152)--how to construct morality and values in a confused, damaged postwar world. His complex, personal manhood finally proves superior to Pedro Romero's textbook masculinity in that it allows Jake to entertain a more complex view of femininity than traditionalists such as Montoya can accept.



## II.

Early sexual experiences provide obvious instances of gender performance. Flirtation and sex play are both "signifying gestures through which gender itself is established" (Butler viii), and a young person performs--or refuses to perform--such "signifying gestures" in an attempt to establish his or her own identity in the cultural matrix. Although children generally become aware of sexual differences long before adolescence, one's subsequent confrontation of his or her own sexual desires represents a crucial stage in the formation of a gendered self. Judith Butler draws attention to "the very different ways in which . . . [sexuality] is understood depending on how the field of power is articulated" (18), and both Frost and Hemingway are well aware of the implications of power inherent in sexuality. Frost's "The Subverted Flower" and Hemingway's "Up in Michigan" both depict a woman's earliest sexual experience, although in noticeably different contexts. These works detail the pain, guilt, and frustration that may attend sexual performance when the entirety of the participants' knowledge stems from a purely binary assumption of sex roles.

Frost's "The Subverted Flower" depicts a young man and woman standing outside the young woman's family garden as she violently rebuffs his sexual advances. One might detect "a cultural theme . . . found in folklore in such versions as *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Beauty and the Beast*" regarding "the motif of a walled and secure place in which a woman's virginity, associated with a flower, is protected against attacks" from lecherous, unworthy men (Storch 298). However, in this poem, the flower represents sexual desire--"an image that



equates love and cruelty" (Nitchie 103)--as well as the young woman's maidenhead. "The Subverted Flower" of the title refers not to the woman's virginity (which remains intact), but to the stifling of natural sexual emotion. "The tender-headed flower" (4) thus becomes a symbol at war with itself, simultaneously an emblem of masculine desire and feminine virtue that must conquer--"he lashed his open palm" (3)--the lust it logically breeds or be destroyed by it.

The equivocal narration and repeated use of animalistic imagery in "The Subverted Flower" produce a far more complicated discourse than that found in a simple fairy tale. For instance, the narrator stresses the young man's "calm" (1) demeanor and his intent "not to harm" (20), implying that his bestial nature might be a projection of the young woman's consciousness:

"If this has come to us  
 And not to me alone----"  
 So she thought she heard him say;  
 Though with every word he spoke  
 His lips were sucked and blown  
 And the effort made him choke  
 Like a tiger at a bone. (23-29)

The narrator shifts to the girl's viewpoint at line 25--"So she thought she heard him say"--suggesting that the following description remains a product of her own perspective, particularly in light of the absence of apparent violence or aggression in his quoted speech (23-24). Thus, imaginative reconstruction of an

event becomes a performance in its own right. He is figured "like a tiger at a bone" (29) because she sees him that way; her sexual anxieties transform him into a monster in her eyes, not necessarily in reality. Significantly, the narrator also notes, "*She thought she heard him say*" (25, emphasis added), hinting that her "fear" (37) and confusion affect her senses.

The narrative returns to an omniscient perspective, elaborating upon what the young woman's immaturity and fright prevent her from apprehending:

A girl could only see  
 That a flower had marred a man,  
 But what she could not see  
 Was that the flower might be  
 Other than base and fetid:  
 That the flower had done but part,  
 And what the flower began  
 Her own too meager heart  
 Had terribly completed. (48-56)

Herbert Marks contends "that it is precisely her inviolability that brings the episode to its wretched consummation. There is nothing necessarily vicious about the man's original appeal. . . . The degradation is gradual; and a closer look suggests that each step is precipitated by her failure to respond" (Marks 137). For example, one animal reference occurs in the narrative before the young woman's perspective asserts itself--"his ragged muzzle" (14)--which suggests that there might, in fact, be a nonhuman quality present in the young

man's lust, an anticipation of the dehumanization that is to follow. The bestial images multiply rapidly, however, after the woman's viewpoint is introduced: the "tiger" passage (27-29), "a paw" (42), "the snout" (46), and "the dog . . . / Obeying bestial laws" (58-59), indicating her deep-seated fear of sexual performance.

Although not entirely irrational, the young woman's fright and rage seem a bit severe when read in light of the young man's apparently innocent advances, and she retreats from the possibilities of adulthood and sexual maturation to the "backward home" (73) of her childhood. Ironically, she too is described in bestial terms--spitting "bitter words . . . / Like some tenacious bit" (66-67) while "her mother wiped the foam / From her chin" (71-72)--as her senses awaken to the "horror" (70) of "her own too meager heart" (55). Whereas her initial fear freezes her senses--standing silent, "either blind / Or willfully unkind" (6-7)--now she "look[s]" (57), "see[s]" (48), and "hear[s]" (64) in the throes of anger, her awakened senses inspiring subsequent action and performance. Her impression of the young man as beastlike gives way to the narrator's terrible depiction of the young woman's animalistic fury. Unable to comprehend her companion's natural desire, she becomes the writhing beast she fears, her transformation a pathological expression of her own immaturity and her refusal to address the nature of sexuality.

Liz Coates of Hemingway's "Up in Michigan" presents a similar case of sexual immaturity and inexperience, yet both her attitude and her situation's outcome distinguish her from the young woman of "The Subverted Flower." A young woman working in Mrs. Smith's kitchen, Liz takes an interest in the town

blacksmith, Jim Gilmore. Although Jim "never thought about her" (59), Liz thinks about Jim "all the time" (60). In a passage reminiscent of Gertrude Stein's experiments with repetition, the narrator elaborates upon the nature of Liz's attraction:

Liz liked Jim very much. She liked it the way he walked over from the shop and often went to the kitchen door to watch for him to start down the road. She liked it about his mustache. She liked it about how white his teeth were when he smiled. She liked it very much that he didn't look like a blacksmith. She liked it how much D. J. Smith and Mrs. Smith liked Jim. One day she found that she liked it the way the hair was black on his arms and how white they were above the tanned line when he washed up in the washbasin outside the house. Liking that made her feel funny. (59)

Noting the slightly awkward phrase, "she liked it," Alice Hall Petry categorizes such speech as "the non-grammatical syntax associated with 'puppy love,'" explaining that the word "like" "conveys the . . . noncommittal nature of her interest . . . a rather distant infatuation" (24). The largely physical details--mustache, white teeth, etc.--neglect his personality and indicate the superficial nature of her crush, and the fact that she looks to the Smiths for approval further suggests her emotional immaturity.

The paragraph's most telling phrase, however, remains "Liking that made her feel funny" (59). Liz begins to feel a sexual attraction for Jim, but her innocence prevents her from defining such emotions. Her inexperience also explains her failure to recognize the potential danger present in Jim's lust. This

is certainly not to say that Liz can be blamed for any of the actions that lead to her rape at the end of the dock, but rather that she remains naive until after the fact, unable to foresee the events that eventually unfold. One should note that, in contrast to Liz's superficial attraction, Jim entertains absolutely no feelings for Liz before the night of the rape. Only then, fueled by whiskey and the exhilarated satisfaction of the hunt, does he indicate his desire through his crude sexual performance. As Jim advances and cups her breasts, "Liz was terribly frightened, no one had ever touched her, but she thought, 'He's come to me finally. He's really come'" (61), and she fails to understand that she does not exist for Jim as anything but a sex object.

Paul Smith contends that "the significance of the climactic union . . . is not only that the one's passion coincided with the other's sentimental curiosity, but that it happened on the return from a hunt to something like a home" (7). Thus Jim's cruel performance becomes the product of a pathetic attempt to articulate his masculine desire, inseparable from his passion for food and drink as exemplified by the hunt and its concluding celebration. Although the privileged reader learns of Liz's confused desire, the nearly chiasmic "She was frightened but she wanted it. She had to have it but it frightened her" (62) places her fear in the dominant first and final positions, and she *never* grants Jim consent. His only response--"I'm going to. You know we got to" (62)--implies that he forces himself upon her in an attempt to actualize his own perverted notions of an unnaturally imposed masculine code, denying agency and debasing his own

desires as his terrible "big hand" (62) becomes a synecdoche for his unfeeling performance.

The narrator describes Liz's response from a third-person limited perspective, increasing the scene's pathos and hinting at Hemingway's sympathy for the abused young woman:

The hemlock planks of the dock were hard and splintery and cold and Jim was heavy on her and he had hurt her. . . . He wouldn't move. She worked her way out from under him and sat up and straightened her skirt and coat and tried to do something with her hair. Jim was sleeping with his mouth a little open. Liz leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. . . . Liz started to cry. . . . She was cold and miserable and everything felt gone. . . . Jim stirred and curled a little tighter. Liz took off her coat and leaned over and covered him with it. She tucked it around him neatly and carefully. (62)

The first sentence's repeated "and"s and numerous clauses suggest that Liz has been overwhelmed by the trauma and that her pain and fear are increasing by the minute. Lisa Tyler argues, "the fact that Liz kisses Jim afterwards does not mean that what she experienced was not a rape" (5); rather, as Marylyn Lupton phrases it, her post-coital performance "enacts the tender pantomime of the gentle mother . . . she merely substitutes one ideal form of love for another" (Lupton 6). Her behavior recalls the young girl's retreat to the mother at the end of "The Subverted Flower," although Liz has been victimized whereas her counterpart has not.



While both women fail to understand male sexuality, the male characters provide the significant differences between Frost's poem and Hemingway's story. The young man of "The Subverted Flower" does not intend to harm the young woman he desires, and he flees the scene once he realizes how severely she has misinterpreted his advances. On the other hand, although Jim does not deliberately harm Liz, that is exactly what he does by raping her, a function of his inebriation and the fact that "in effect, Jim perceives Liz in exclusively sexual terms whereas Liz, due to her innocence, is conscious only of a non-sexual, romanticized attraction to him" (Petry 27). Neither Liz nor the young woman of "The Subverted Flower" can accurately perceive the potential danger of sexual performance. They are immature and inexperienced, and their innocence prevents them from reaching sexual maturity. They do not understand their own desires, and therefore they cannot comprehend masculine lust nor the danger inherent in carnal impulses.

### III.

Frost often employs the lyric mode--as opposed to narrative in "The Subverted Flower"--in a deliberate attempt to elevate sexual performance to an ideal state through metaphor. Poems such as "Putting in the Seed" and "The Silken Tent," both composed in the demanding sonnet form, are representative of Frost's tendency to explore his art in terms of sexual conceits. In this way, he performs a meditative act, for writing poetry is itself a performance. Although many readers fail to recognize Frost's fascination with the erotic in such poems



as "To Earthward" or "Birches," his poems are often highly charged with sensual imagery and content, frequently in relation to the regenerative qualities of nature and his own verse. Unlike dramatic narratives such as "The Housekeeper" or "Home Burial," "Putting in the Seed" and "The Silken Tent" constantly remind the reader that they are in fact tightly constructed lyrics whose meaning derives, in part, from the intentional mingling of sexual metaphors and the artistic consciousness.

Significantly, the crux of "Putting in the Seed" is the speaker's discovery of the metaphorical characteristics ingrained within the act of sexual intercourse:

You come to fetch me from my work tonight  
 When supper's on the table, and we'll see  
 If I can leave off burying the white  
 Soft petals fallen from the apple tree  
 (Soft petals, yes, but not so barren quite,  
 Mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea),  
 And go along with you ere you lose sight  
 Of what you came for and become like me,  
 Slave to a springtime passion for the earth.  
 How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed  
 On through the watching for that early birth  
 When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,  
 The sturdy seedling with arched body comes  
 Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs. (123)

As Daniel R. Barnes explains, "Frost is consciously exploiting the folk custom of having intercourse in a freshly sown field in order to insure the success of the crops" (Item 59), transforming "the sturdy seedling" (13) into a newborn baby's "arched body . . . / Shouldering its way" (13-14) toward life in a posture reminiscent of "the arched bodies in the sexual act" (Meyers 139). The intense metaphorical complex--coupled with the heavily accented, irregular pentameter lines that suggest both the rhythms of intercourse and the exertion of childbirth--marvelously forecasts Dylan Thomas's "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower."

The poem's most compelling facet, however, remains the speaker's performative transition from jovial teasing--"You come to fetch me from my work tonight / When supper's on the table" (1-2)--to "the ceremonious grandeur of line 10 ('How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed')" (Poirier 206). First of all, the speaker's mature relationship with his wife--the sonnet's "you"--enables him to actualize desire--"How Love burns" (10)--in the form of regenerative physical love as opposed to the carnality of "The Subverted Flower" or "Up in Michigan," thereby providing the inspiration for his eventual "discovery of metaphor" (Poirier 218). Frost underscores the poetic work the speaker performs in order to arrive at his conceit by placing the sonnet's volta in the sestet's second line, rather than its first. Although the sestet's elevated language might seem inimical to "the familiar country-folk teasing of the first two lines" (Poirier 206), archaic words such as "ere" (7) or the phrase "not so barren quite" (5) subtly anticipate the tonal modulation.

The process of constructing a sexual metaphor, then, becomes a performance in its own right. Richard Poirier argues that “the poem rather intriguingly follows the sequence described in the Preface [to *Lyrical Ballads*] by which Wordsworth shows that the language ‘really used by men’ necessarily evolves, in moments of high or extraordinary passion, into rhetorical enlargements and metrical movements” (220), the likes of which have been demonstrated above. The speaker’s excited, impassioned, “How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed” (10), for instance, captures his pride both in his work and in his artistic ability. Thus sexuality becomes an articulation of the speaker’s creative power, as well as the ultimate expression of his love for his wife. The couple’s regenerative sexual relationship (which occasions the metaphor in the first place) suggests the powerful performative relation between emotional and physical love.

By extension, that same “mutual dependence of freedom and restraint” (Marks 128) informs Frost’s “The Silken Tent”:

She is as in a field a silken tent  
At midday when a sunny summer breeze  
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,  
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,  
And its supporting central cedar pole,  
That is its pinnacle to heavenward  
And signifies the sureness of the soul,  
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,

But strictly held by none, is loosely bound  
 By countless silken ties of love and thought  
 To everything on earth the compass round,  
 And only by one's going slightly taut  
 In the capriciousness of summer air  
 Is of the slightest bondage made aware. (331-332)

The poet's formal mastery strikes the reader first and foremost. Although the single sentence that constitutes "The Silken Tent" adheres to the rigorous demands of Shakespearean sonnet form, frequent enjambment and metric variation combine to create an easy, natural rhythm suggestive of "the capriciousness of summer air" (13). Playful, typically Frostian gestures abound, including the "triple pun on ropes, mockery and men" (Meyers 265) contained in the word "guys" (4), and the sonnet's "going slightly taut" (12) by the nature of its concluding couplet. Furthermore, the tent's "supporting central cedar pole" (5) appears in the central quatrain, implicitly linking the tent's framework with the sonnet form in terms of their shared reliance on the pole as governing principle. While this shaft--a "pinnacle to heavenward" (6) that hints at sexual ecstasy--appears conventionally phallic, it paradoxically "signifies the sureness" (7) of the female figure mentioned in the first line.

The metaphor's gender confusion illustrates a mutually dependent relationship between the sexes, and the alliance benefits both parties. Frost undermines the pole's specious solitary existence--"strictly held by none" (9)--when the narrator claims that it "*seems* to owe naught to any single cord" (8,

emphasis added), simultaneously affirming the comparison's validity and introducing an element of uncertainty. Rather than a misogynistic celebration of feminine reliance on the phallus, the metaphor venerates the "countless silken ties of love and thought" (10) that support the pole as the pole unites them through its signifying presence. The conventionally masculine post and feminine folds of fabric *together* form the tent "in a necessarily contingent freedom. The balanced tensions, appropriately, are both erotic and metaphysical" (Marks 129). Thus the "bondage" (14) mentioned in the final line is not an unwelcome restriction, but a responsibility affirmative in its structural indispensability.

However, if the poem exalts the female in her capacity to provide that structure, to create meaning through a configuration of mutually dependent love, then the metaphor also serves as an objectification. Poirier insists that "the voice usurps the centrality only apparently given to the figures it lays down. Not the placement assigned to her or a tent so much as the *act* of placement . . . imposes itself, by the authoritative peculiarity of syntax, as the subject of compelling interest" (xiii). Frost's poetic performance therefore represents a necessarily reductive view of feminine sexuality. In a remarkable inversion of the Platonic dichotomy, the idealized form--female sexuality--has apparently been subverted by Frost's command of the poetic idiom. But Poirier continues:

The whole poem is a performance, a display for the beloved while also being an exemplification of what it is like for a poem, as well as a tent or a person, to exist within the constrictions of space ('a field') and time ('at

midday') wherein the greatest possible freedom is consistent with the intricacies of form and inseparable from them. (xiv-xv)

One could argue that "The Silken Tent" attempts to define female sexuality in terms of material representation, yet Frost declines to do so. His complicated syntax, professed uncertainty--"seems to owe naught"--and the central metaphor's gender confusion present a refusal to confine sexuality in any but the most suggestive terms. Karen L. Kilcup correctly states, "what holds the image, the poem, and the world together is in fact 'love and thought'--the intercourse between the poet and his beloved, speaker and reader, and the way he constructs that connection" (230).

Frost has clearly taken the agreement of form and content to a metaphysical level, confirming belief in the constant evolution of identity through gender performance in a masterful, yet self-deprecatory poem that highlights the inadequate nature of comparison but finds meaning in the performative act of constructing a metaphor. One cannot *be* a silken tent, and Frost's hesitant diction confirms that very assertion: "She is as in a field a silken tent" (1). Similar to the speaker of "Putting in the Seed," the speaker of "The Silken Tent" delights in the creation of metaphors; in this case, a nebulous, highly suggestive metaphor that glorifies the impenetrable essence of sexuality, presumably finding satisfaction in the awareness hinted at in the poem's concluding line. Far more sophisticated than the characters of "Up in Michigan" and "The Subverted Flower," these speakers understand the complexities of desire and the mystery of metaphor. Much like Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises*,

these speakers search for significance in the act of constructing meaning, as sexual identity becomes a function of performance and the creative impulse emerges as the governing principle of existence.

...is in Frost's "The Silken Tent" for example, which is a variation of the writer's creative process. After all, the text is not the actual author from the implied author. The text is a personal statement that contemporary readers often take to be the most intimate of revelations. Both are aware of such a relationship between the writer and the text, to great pains to conceal autobiographical elements from their works which might undermine their carefully constructed public images. For instance, detected F. Scott Fitzgerald's confessional *Crank Up* (1925) revealed his friend's decision to "abandon" (qtd. in Mellow 101) after abandoning manuscripts that had been his "psychic" persona, such as *The Garden of Eden* (1925) published posthumously in 1961. Frost also considered the possibility of publishing certain poems, such as "The Silken Tent" (1911) until he learned of Frost's death for fear of her anger and disapproval.

Certainly, the relationship between the writer and the text is not one of a simple relationship between the writer and the text. This is most certainly evident in Frost's "The Silken Tent" which is a variation of the writer's creative process. The text is a personal statement that contemporary readers often take to be the most intimate of revelations. Both are aware of such a relationship between the writer and the text, to great pains to conceal autobiographical elements from their works which might undermine their carefully constructed public images. For instance, detected F. Scott Fitzgerald's confessional *Crank Up* (1925) revealed his friend's decision to "abandon" (qtd. in Mellow 101) after abandoning manuscripts that had been his "psychic" persona, such as *The Garden of Eden* (1925) published posthumously in 1961. Frost also considered the possibility of publishing certain poems, such as "The Silken Tent" (1911) until he learned of Frost's death for fear of her anger and disapproval.



## Chapter Four: Gender and the Creative Impulse

If writing itself becomes a mode of performance--as in Frost's "The Silken Tent," for example--then the text becomes a reflection of the writer's creative impulse. Although a critical reader must separate the actual author from the implied author, one cannot forget that a published text is a personal statement that--contemporary theoretical trends notwithstanding--often represents the most intimate of revelations. Frost and Hemingway were both acutely aware of such a relationship between author and text, frequently going to great pains to conceal autobiographical elements in their respective works which might undermine their carefully constructed public images. Hemingway, for instance, detested F. Scott Fitzgerald's confessional *Crack-Up* essays and berated his friend's decision to "whine in public" (qtd. in Mellow 461), ultimately abandoning manuscripts that might damage his own macho "Papa Hemingway" persona, such as *The Garden of Eden* (published posthumously in 1986). Frost also considered the personal implications of his printed verse, choosing not to publish certain poems, such as "The Subverted Flower," until after his wife Elinor's death for fear of her anger and disapproval.

Certain artist/creator figures do, however, appear in Hemingway's fiction and Frost's verse, hinting at a more subjective relationship between author and text than one would generally assume exists. This is most certainly *not* to say that either Frost's or Hemingway's characters are thinly veiled reflections of their creators; Nick Adams, for instance, is no more Ernest Hemingway than Stephen

Dedalus is James Joyce. Both Frost and Hemingway were masters of their craft who--although they may have found compelling subject matter in their own lives--elevated that autobiographically inspired material to the level of art through a celebrated process of intense revision. A story such as "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" or poem such as "Paul's Wife," then, remains highly suggestive of the writer's own ideas about the relationship between gender and art, although one should hesitate to push such implications too far in the direction of strict autobiography.

A number of interesting correlations between Hemingway's own life and that of his protagonist Harry do exist, implying that Hemingway might be using Harry's personality to explore some of his own anxieties about writing. When Hemingway wrote "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (*The Fifth Column and the First Forty-nine Stories*) in 1935, he, much like Harry, was approaching middle age and a second divorce, reflecting upon the potentially deleterious effects of money, drink, women, and ambition on his art. Hemingway's two nonfiction works of the 1930s, *Death in the Afternoon* and *Green Hills of Africa*, were not received nearly as well as his earlier fiction had been--possibly engendering doubts about his own artistic talent--and many, notably Edmund Wilson and Bernard De Voto, speculated that his status as a public figure was beginning to overwhelm his fiction. Furthermore, his well-documented illnesses and injuries had begun to escalate--most significantly, a case of amoebic dysentery that sidelined him during a 1933 African safari with his then wife, Pauline, and which most critics agree provided the inspiration for Harry's fatal gangrene in "Snows."

In 1935, the aging Hemingway had ample cause to wonder about whether he would live long enough to complete a substantial body of work.

While on safari with his third wife, Harry's leg becomes infected and gangrenous. Unable to reach a hospital, the fictional writer feels death approaching, and he laments his failed career: the time he has wasted among the contemptible rich and the many stories he will never write, "the things that he had saved to write until he knew enough to write them well" (41). At first, he blames his wife Helen and her money for his deterioration, but then he recognizes his own culpability in falling victim to the upper crust's superficially attractive lifestyle:

... He heard a shot beyond the hill.

She shot very well this good, this rich bitch, this kindly caretaker and destroyer of his talent. Nonsense. He had destroyed his talent himself. Why should he blame this woman because she kept him well?

He had destroyed his talent by not using it, by betrayals of himself and what he believed in, by drinking so much that he blunted the edge of his perceptions, by laziness, by sloth, and by snobbery, by pride and by prejudice, by hook and by crook. What was this? A catalogue of old books? What was his talent anyway? It was a talent all right but instead of using it, he had traded on it. It was never what he had done, but always what he could do. And he had chosen to make his living with something else instead of a pen or a pencil. It was strange, too, wasn't it,

that when he fell in love with another woman, that woman should always have more money than the last one? (45)

Hemingway's unique stream-of-consciousness approach--a far cry from the renowned experiments of Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner--modulates as Harry admits that his attacks on Helen are a function of his own disappointment. His conspicuous repetitions of the words "this" and "destroy" signal a displacement of his own self-loathing, a projection of fear and anger in his contradictory description of Helen as "this kindly caretaker and destroyer of his talent." Harry's subsequent admission of guilt complicates that apparently ironic statement as one realizes that Helen has in fact been his "caretaker." Her wealth provides him with a comfortable lifestyle; he, alone, has chosen to forsake his art and succumb to the temptations of indolence. Even now, she hunts for their food, and his "first angry thoughts, directed at his wife, are abruptly re-focused on himself, providing the occasion for an even more damning account of his own masculine illusions of control" (Bush 34). Not only does Harry no longer write, but he has been stripped of the traditionally masculine role of provider. Thus the loss of a creative identity parallels a crippled gender identity.

Bush continues, noting a similarity between "the current position in Harry's career and . . . the oldest female profession" (35). As Harry admits, he has chosen to make his living with something else instead of a pen or a pencil" (45), and his coy refusal to mention sexual performance in this context underscores his shame at having sacrificed his potential as an artist. Instead, he fails to assert a traditionally masculine independence and prostitutes himself in

exchange for material wealth and sexual satisfaction. His remorse for having "traded on" his talent furthers the economic metaphor introduced in such phrases as "the steps by which she had acquired him" (46). Harry associates sex and money throughout "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," and he goes so far as to tell Helen that he'd "like to destroy you a few times in bed" (47). Tellingly, the word "destroy"--previously linked to her wealth and his artistic ruin--now becomes a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Harry's few happy memories of his life with Helen generally concern their sexual relationship--"she had a great talent and appreciation for the bed" (45), for instance--suggesting his own insecure tendency to conceive of Helen as either a "destroyer" or a sex object.

Ultimately, Harry sees Helen as the intrusion of an imperfect reality into the ideal world of his memory and imagination. The story's second italicized section reveals that Harry was once capable of "*loving*," although each successive relationship--the deplorable anonymity of "*every one he had slept with*"--represents his attempt to stifle his passion for "*the first one, the one who left him*" (48). Harry writes to his first wife and claims that "*he knew he could not cure himself of loving her*" (48), and his second marriage breaks up following the arrival of his first wife's reply, thereby linking his loss of emotion with his eventual inability to write. Hemingway often sets Helen's very existence in opposition to Harry's desire to write--for instance, she answers his "I want to write" with "you ought to take some broth to keep your strength up" (49)--and her well-meaning yet vacuous speech prevents the reader from ever becoming fully sympathetic to her character.

Although one could certainly argue that Hemingway's portrayal of Helen represents his attempt to write her as Harry sees her, Helen's incomplete characterization reveals Hemingway's own deep-seated anxiety about undermining his own masculinity through the creation of female characters. The narrative endeavors to justify her love and respect for Harry by placing him in opposition to "the lovers [that had] bored her" (46), but her repeated denials of the seriousness of Harry's condition and her desperate attempts to keep a stiff upper lip prohibit the complete realization of her character. Hemingway's final condemnation derives from his repeated juxtapositions of Helen and the hyena, which has come to symbolize Harry's death and decay: "the firelight shone on her pleasantly lined face and he could see that she was sleepy. He heard the hyena make a noise just outside the range of the fire" (54) or "She was a fine woman, marvellous really. And just then it occurred to him that he was going to die. It came with . . . a sudden evil-smelling emptiness and the odd thing was that the hyena slipped lightly along the edge of it" (47).

Hemingway's early work indicates his facility at creating such strong, sympathetic female characters as Brett Ashley or Jig of "Hills Like White Elephants," yet as his career progressed his work expresses a growing anxiety about his ability to depict sensitive women. Lynn claims that Hemingway felt increasingly "impelled to prove [his] masculinity through flat denials of [his] anxieties" even though he was fascinated "with the ambiguities of feminine identity" (318, 322). The case becomes even more compelling once one considers that the wives of his fiction--Dr. Adams's wife in the stories, Catherine



Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*, Margot Macomber, or Catherine Bourne in *The Garden of Eden*, to name just a few--are the ones that critics most frequently discuss when attacking Hemingway's apparent misogyny. But "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" is too knowing to be simply misogynistic. Harry's opinions of Helen provide a fine example of the writer's doubts concerning his own abilities, a skepticism which plagued Hemingway for much of his career. His complex fictional representation of Harry, a character unable to understand his wife's role in his creative life, underscores Hemingway's own uneasiness at writing female characters while maintaining his own macho public image.

Frost's "Paul's Wife" (*New Hampshire*) based upon a forgotten incident of the Paul Bunyan legend (Benoit, Item 22), explicitly links issues of gender and language in its concluding lines:

Owning a wife with him meant owning her.

She wasn't anybody else's business,

Either to praise her or so much as name her,

And he'd thank people not to think of her.

Murphy's idea was that a man like Paul

Wouldn't be spoken to about a wife

In any way the world knew how to speak. (151-157)

Paul removes the pith from a curiously hollow pine, dips it into "the pond nearby" (96) and watches amazed as, like Venus emerging from the foam, "It slowly rose a person, rose a girl" (108). A rustic Pygmalion figure, Paul's logging prowess--he is "the hero of the mountain camps" (17)--associates him with the forest,



therefore suggesting that he has created this woman of himself. The comparison of the pith to "the skin a snake had cast / And left" (92-93) lends a fascinating Edenic dimension to Frost's exploration of language and creation, a suggestion of an inextricable, mythic link between sin and creation that Frost's poem never truly engages.

Paul creates this woman, but he bristles at his companions' questions about her: "a man like Paul / Wouldn't be spoken to about a wife / In any way the world knew how to speak" (155-157). The final word, "speak," aligns the poem with "Home Burial," in which the husband exasperatedly exclaims, "A man can't speak of his own child that's dead" (70), hinting that Frost expresses gender issues in terms of linguistic differences, as seen earlier in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." Judith Oster notes that, "To Paul, the word 'wife' and the woman named by the word were inseparable. . . . for to speak the word that represented her was to violate her, to profane her" (217), a claim that gains credence when one considers that the lumberjacks' intrusion upon their idyllic life "put her light out" (143). Paul's notion of "owning a wife" (151), then, highlights his dual role as chivalrous protector and jealous husband. While hiding his wife indicates Paul's stifling, self-centered nature, his wife's fragility clearly gives him reason for the concern Herbert Marks terms "the necessity of concealment" (127). However, to assert that Paul rightfully shields his wife from an unkind world is to neglect "that necessary correspondence between masking and metaphor" (128) which Frost investigates throughout his collected works.

Take, for instance, the initial simile used to describe the woman: "her wet hair heavy on her like a helmet" (109). One traditionally associates helmets with soldiers, an oddly masculine reference for one to make when describing a woman, particularly if one reads the simile as a crude reference to the tip of a man's penis. Furthermore, the helmet is oppressive in that it encloses one's head, yet it simultaneously functions in a protective manner, much like Paul himself does. He becomes entranced by her beauty and self-sufficiency, "taking after her around the pond" (122) in an obviously suppliant manner, following "darkly, like her shadow" (136). Paul's creation bewilders him, and the mingling of genders in the helmet simile becomes an expression of Frost's own inquiries into the nature of gendered characters and metaphors.

Frost's poem implicitly poses the question of what implications are generated by a male character's creation of a female, or a male poet's representation of the feminine. In a sense, the entire process can be viewed as reductive and self-defeating; one either becomes "a terrible possessor" (150) or pitifully loses "all the light" (136) of the creative process. Frost's subordinate clause "and that was all" (144) draws an explicit connection between Frost's wife and "The Most of It" (*A Witness Tree*, 1942), hinting that Paul's creative impulse might eventually prove as doomed as the later poem's urge for a "voice in answer . . . counter-love, original response" (2, 8). However, Frost's descriptive stance in "Paul's Wife" suggests a different, though related, interpretation through the mode of narrative distance. The entire tale is recounted by an anonymous lumberjack who, although he himself is acquainted with Paul by

virtue of their shared occupation, gains most of his knowledge from a character Benoit describes as "the Snopesian figure, Murphy" (Item 22).

The narrator admits his own uncertainty in such phrases as "I forget" (59) and "But I guess" (49), subtly undermining the authority of his own narrative. Paul's exploits have become the stuff of legend--"Everyone's / heard how . . ." (42-43)--yet no one knows just why Paul becomes so aggravated at the mere mention of his wife. The lumberjacks alternately hypothesize that "he had no wife" (4), or that he had "been jilted" (7), or that he was constantly worried about her "getting into mischief" (15), or that his wife had "run away with someone else and left him" (9), but no single explanation seems quite satisfactory. Not one of those suggestions acknowledges the complexities of married life, much less the implications of gendered creation. Frost further confuses the issue by refusing to allow his narrator to speculate as to whether the woman vanishes forever or returns to Paul after the lumberjacks' "brute tribute of respect to beauty" (141), underscoring the association between uncertainty and representation that appears so often in Frost's poetry.

Frost, then, questions the very nature of gender representation in "Paul's Wife" as Hemingway does in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." Both writers derive strength from their implicit admission that any attempt to describe or depict women in terms of a masculine order is, by nature, potentially reductive and inadequate. Whether expressed through Harry's self-conscious contradictions or Paul's simultaneously submissive and overbearing behavior, these writers evince a profound understanding of the necessity for uncertainty in characterization.

Their refusal to classify characters strictly in gendered terms indicates a sensitive recognition of the fact that gender is merely one cultural classification that a writer employs in describing a character, and that such categories are in constant flux. Literature is a suggestive--rather than a conclusive--art, and both Hemingway and Frost are far too talented, far too sensitive to allow reductive categorical definitions to influence their methods of characterization. Paradoxically, a realization that supposed binaries (such as gender) are incomplete engenders the freedom to create believable, sympathetic characters. One is not strong or weak, active or passive in Hemingway or Frost simply because one is male or female--both writers refuse to make such simple assumptions. Although sexual characteristics exist in terms of a simple binary, the process of becoming a gendered being is far more complex, dependent upon (among other things) individual performance and choice in an overarching social context. Consequently, Hemingway and Frost realize the responsibilities inherent in writing gendered characters, and their complex, sophisticated methods of characterization reflect such a belief in the ultimately indeterminate nature of both masculinity and femininity. Like Harry in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," their greatest accomplishments are expressed in terms of imagination, the unbridled urge to transcend reductive presumptions.

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