

Women and writing in the garden of eden



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In *The Garden of Eden*, David Bourne retreats into his writing to escape the complications of his life, complications located predominantly in the actions and moods of his young wife, Catherine. He keeps a space all his own in which he writes; a daily regimen regulates his work practices. He muses, “ If you cannot respect the way you handle your life then certainly respect your trade. You know about your trade at least” (148). There is comfort in having something all his own that he understands well and can control. Yet Catherine attempts at every turn to undermine this one thing that he has, to cheapen it or appropriate it for herself. Marita, however, is appreciative and respectful of David’s work; she is not jealous of or threatened by his talent. With Marita he no longer must guard himself against incessant insecurity and jealousy; he willingly shares with her the ordered, insular world of his writing and makes himself vulnerable in a new way. His understanding of people and how best to interact with others in the world is altered, if only temporarily, and he is able to tap into a part of his writing previously unknown to him. In Africa, David learned to “ never tell anyone anything” (181). One cannot trust others with anything, because people are apt to use anything given them to pursue only those ends personally beneficial, often destroying something meaningful or beautiful in the process. Thus, at the novel’s open, David is guarded; he is not free with the world he has established for himself where nothing exists saves those landscapes and characters he creates. Through writing, he achieves pure agency; he lets no one into this world, even peripherally. “. . . [David] wrote from an inner core which could not be split nor even marked nor scratched” (183): because it is exclusively his own, no person is able to corrupt or destroy his writing. His art is the logical

outgrowth of his philosophy. David desires total autonomy and he has found it in literature.

Catherine is threatened by this part of David that she cannot touch. David is hers – and she has no one else, no friends, no family – and thus she must transform him totally as proof of this, to exercise her agency. She manipulates David into changing his appearance; she changes their sexual dynamic. She and David are “ against all the others,” she says (37), and thus they must be together and equal in all things, or at least (contradictorily) be together and equal in the way she envisions. David’s reviews of his newest book, his “ clippings”, infuriate her. She berates David for keeping them and reading them, as if he were obsessive. The clippings are something of which she is not a part; they are uniquely David’s, a part of his work. She approves of the “ narrative” that he is writing, an account of their time together in Europe, because she sees it as a monument to herself. She fears that when she dies, all that she has done and felt will fall away: “. . . I don’t want to die and it be gone” (53). David’s narrative is the solution. She gradually tries to appropriate the narrative for herself, making plans for it, and in her final letter to David actually referring to it as “ my book” (237).

Catherine despises his short stories inspired by the African experiences of his youth. Not only are they writings which he does not want her to read or engage with in any way, but they are very nearly autobiographical and therefore immediately personal to David, something which, of course, Catherine cannot tolerate. She says, “. . . [T]he stories are just your way of escaping your duty” (190), his duty, apparently, to her and to documenting their life and experiences. Ultimately, she burns his stories and his clippings

to illustrate this and to refocus his work back on the narrative. Catherine wants to take from David everything that is exclusively his – clippings, writing, individual identity, manhood – and she nearly succeeds.

Marita is at first another complication brought on by Catherine. David finds her beautiful, but is averse to her presence in their small hotel, thinking it will further wrench he and Catherine apart; “The hell with her,” David says several times. He wishes Catherine would take her away. However, as Catherine drifts deeper into herself than ever before and becomes more eccentric and moody, David grows closer to Marita, realizing, eventually, his love for her: “Christ, it was good to finish [the second Africa story] today and have her there. Marita there with no damned jealousy of the work and have her know what you were reaching for and how far you went. She really knows and it’s not faked. I do love her . . .” (204)

Marita adores his Africa stories and expresses properly complex feelings about them, where Catherine’s reaction is simply disgust – a feeling that is truly a disguise for her jealousy and annoyance that David chose to work on these stories rather than the narrative. Marita is secure in herself and kind, and David senses this. Unlike Catherine, she does not wish to “destroy” David or the products of his artistry, she admires his talent and wishes for it whatever David wishes. Her affection for David’s Africa stories and relative disinterest in the narrative makes her the metaphorical opposite of Catherine: she sees an especial kind of veracity and power in the Africa short stories, those deeply personal to David. His control over this literary world is not a site of contention, but of appreciation. His control breeds high caliber work, and thus it is worthy of respect. Catherine is too selfish and single

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minded to see this, or at least to express it; the fact that the stories are at a remove from her is sufficient for her to discount them as evidence of David's betrayal.

David's time with Catherine only affirms his ideas about not telling anyone anything. Belief in innate human selfishness is at the core of such a philosophy, or rather, fear that human selfishness will lead to the ruin of something important. Indeed, in David's case, Catherine's selfishness and inability to accept his autonomy over one aspect of his life results in the destruction of two of his best stories, the product of weeks – months – of work. However, Marita and David's flowering relationship calls this philosophy into question.

Catherine's leaving allows for David and Marita's romance to begin to become fully realized. Her sweetness is in direct contrast to Catherine's cruelty. She comforts him and feels the pain of the loss of his stories the same as he does. In a crucial moment after finishing his second Africa short story, he sits and reads with Marita as she reads: " He had never done this before and it was against everything he believed about writing He could not help wanting to read it with her and he could not help sharing what he had never shared and what he had believed could not and should not be shared." (203)

He willingly shares with Marita the part of himself that he had for so long kept most carefully guarded: his writing. It is a symbolic affirmation of the difference between his relationship with Marita as compared to his relationship with Catherine, one in which he could never be fully who he was.

With Marita, he can “tell” things, he can reveal himself intimately without fear of being used.

David says to Marita after Catherine burns his stories that “[w]hen it’s once right you never can do it again. You only do it once for each thing” (230); he cannot rewrite what he has lost. And while this may have been true before, in the final paragraphs of the novel, David gets back his stories, every sentence intact. Opening himself up to Marita, exposing the part of him most sacred, caused a change, one that David recognized when it occurred, but forgot. Marita asks on their way out of the hotel after the two read the story together, “Do you think we’re really lucky?” David responds, “Yes . . . I think it changed this morning or maybe in the night” (205), and thus ends Book 3 of *The Garden of Eden*. This change, this opening up of himself, paved the way for something new. His luck had changed, and he says at the very end of Chapter 28, the third to last chapter, that when writing one must gamble. “So gamble,” he says (238). He does gamble and he wins, his luck having changed; he regains what he had lost, without any “sign that any of it would ever cease returning to him intact” (247).

His emancipation from Catherine – the troubled woman whom he still worries for – and his opening up to Marita allowed for the recovery of his prized stories. The novel concludes with David triumphing, yet there is an undercurrent of troubling ambiguity. *The Garden of Eden*’s final line echoes the final line of “Indian Camp”: “In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, [Nick] felt quite sure that he would never die” (95, *The Short Stories*). There is a romantic optimism in both, in David’s case, a kind of pre-lapsarian confidence. Marita in the final

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pages speaks as did Catherine once, saying, “ I’m your girl . . . no matter what I’m always your girl” (245). He writes his and Marita’s name in the sand as an officiation of their marriage, peculiarly as sand is the most ephemeral of writing materials. Do these instances portentously suggest that their relationship will end as did his and Catherine’s, that it will dissolve as will certainly their names on the beach? With time, Hemingway seems to suggest, their good luck will turn, but neither yet realize it.