

Hemingway's feminine ideal



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Ernest Hemingway was a brilliant author but he failed to portray women characters because of his male ideals. In his novel *A Farewell to Arms*, his female characters are shown as subordinate objects who are helpless without a man by their side. The main female role, Catherine Barkley, is used as a major plot point for the story but she is portrayed as a desperate and frail woman, making her an antifeminist figure. Throughout the story her ultimate goal was to be in love with and be loved by Frederic Henry, the main protagonist. She sacrificed much of herself for the promise of being with him. However, Henry saw her as the perfect escape from his troubles and used her as a distraction to avoid his problems throughout the novel. In this way, Hemingway sought to create a picturesque relationship between a man and a woman but in doing so he disregarded feminine views to create his own perfect woman. Hemingway's masculine view of an ideal woman is shown in *A Farewell to Arms* by his weak and underdeveloped character Catherine Barkley.

Catherine's portrayal is heavily based on Hemingway's masculine ideals because his negative female influences inspired him to create a woman who expressed his ideals. He was known to have many wives and, in fact, some of his affairs lasted longer than his marriages. So, Hemingway did not have a positive outlook on women. Sanderson states, "Hemingway's fictive women may be seen as his wishful makeover of modern women" (Sanderson 176). He incorporated the ideals he wished in a woman in order to create his own perfect woman because the women in his life failed to meet these ideals. For example, Sanderson describes, "His father's suicide... reminded him of the failure of his parent's marriage, a failure Hemingway blamed on

his mother's bullying and on his father's inability to stand up to her"(Sanderson 182). His mother's authority figure, which had ruined his father, made Hemingway favor submissive traits in a women. This influenced him into wanting a weak and dependent women who obeys male authority. These ideas are reflected into Catherine which makes her the ideal women in Hemingway's eyes. The women in his life were not able to satisfy what he thought to be the perfect relationship so he embedded his ideal traits in a woman into Catherine.

Catherine's portrayal is heavily based on Hemingway's masculine ideals because his negative female influences inspired him to create a woman who expressed his ideals. Many demeaning feminist traits including helplessness and submission were shown in Catherine's character to reflect Hemingway's ideal. According to his ideals, a perfect woman is one who is " unduly coy, whose posture of trembling helplessness is simply a way of disguising what she... ought to want" (Fetterley 58). Women act weak in order to get what they " ought to want,"-a man. This ideal points out that a woman's ultimate goal should be to get a man they can depend on so they will not be helpless anymore. They will be able to serve and be of use with a man by their side. This is supported when Hemingway writes, " You're my religion. You're all I've got." (Hemingway 116). Catherine is the portrayal of his ideal woman because, as shown in this quote, she willingly sacrifices herself in order to devote herself to Henry. Henry is able to act like her knight in shining armor and ultimately rescue her from herself because as she as shown, she is nothing without him. Hemingway portrayed that women need a man to depend on so they do not mind being subordinate. By wanting to serve

Henry in order to obtain his love, she reflects Hemingway's ideal.

Hemingway made Catherine so weak and submissive to satisfy his ideal that modern women could not achieve for him.

Hemingway tried to make Catherine Barkly appear pure but her submissive traits ultimately made her look desperate. One of her most prominent traits, being submissive to Henry in order to win his attention, highlighted her desperate nature as it made her look like a helpless woman who needed to depend on a man to function and who was content in giving up her will.

Hemingway tried to convey Catherine with purity by giving her redeeming qualities that reflected feminine concepts. Hemingway describes Catherine as a hardworking nurse and even explains that she was once engaged. Being unmarried builds on her image of purity even though she grieves of her fiancé's death. Additionally, being a nurse subjects her to being a noble woman who is always dressed in white. The image of pureness is supported by this white attire as it serves as "a symbol of her purity" (Recla 14). Recla notes, "The women are constantly reassuring their men that they are good girls and normal. Catherine Barkley wants to be the good wife and Frederic's other half" (Recla 21). She was always trying to prove to Henry she was a "good girl" which made her noble but desperate for Henry's acceptance. This is shown when she states, "I know I've made trouble now. But haven't I always been a good girl until now?" (Hemingway 138). Her constant pursuance of Henry makes readers see her as desperate rather than pure as Hemingway intended. She feels she has to be worthy enough for Henry which eliminates her purity of being a "good girl" and makes her just seem lustful to be in love. This is shown by Catherine's desperation as well as

promptness to degrade herself. She readily gave up her own will as shown when Hemingway writes, " I want what you want. There isn't any me anymore. Just what you want." (Hemingway 106). This submission made her dependent on Henry's will and proved even she saw herself as lesser than him. She gave up the ability to make her own choices and promised obedience to Henry which proves her submissive nature. Although Hemingway used pure qualities to characterize her, her desperation and submission further made her an idealized women of his masculine view.

Another flaw in Hemingway's portrayal of Catherine was that he did not fully develop her as a character because he did not grasp the feminine concept of women. Much of Catherine's personality was based on the general image of women and some of her traits had to be interpreted by the reader rather than having a clear grasp of her character. Recla states, " Catherine Barkley's appearance is rarely described" (Recla 14) and, " the lack of detail about the appearance of Catherine Barkley helps to create the shallow, half portrait of a woman" (Recla 16). The reader had to assume many things about Catherine's appearance and personality because we were not given insight into her thoughts and opinion. Additionally, since Henry was the narrator and our window to Catherine's character, his biased view only provided this " shallow" view. He never described her thoughts or specific traits and only pointed out her beauty and loveliness. Recla also points out, " characters maintaining gender specific roles of male provider and female nurturer" (Recla 25). By using generalized roles of the female to characterize Catherine, she did not have distinguishing traits separating her from the common woman. Her simplistic traits support that Hemingway did not know

how to create a proper female character yet. Recla states, "Hemingway had not yet developed the insight into the feminine he needed to truly create a complex characterization of Catherine Barkley" (Recla 15). With his use of generalized roles and flat traits, Hemingway did not know how to portray a woman yet so he used society's portrayal. He was not able to create a full and strong character because he did not understand the feminine view which is why Catherine was portrayed so negatively.

In summation, Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* shows us his portrayal of the ideal woman with the character of Catherine who was shown as weak and not fully developed. Catherine not only expressed traits that belittled herself like desperation and submission, but also left the reader guessing about her personality and appearance. This made her weak and underdeveloped as a character. This may have been due to the fact that Hemingway did not understand the feminine scope enough to portray her correctly. Additionally, he was heavily influenced by society and people in his life. His inability to stay with a woman made him give Catherine traits he wished in a woman. Plus, his mother's traits made him dislike women of authority which explains why Catherine was so submissive. Overall, Catherine was portrayed as weak because she was the outcome of Hemingway's ideas of the perfect woman for a man.