

# Hemingway feminine ideal



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BUSTER**

Ernest Hemingway is praised for his mastery of language and descriptions but his shortcomings are prevalent in his portrayal of female characters that are constantly defiled by 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 element for the development of the main character, yet, she is portrayed as a desperate and frail woman, making her a representation of sexist beliefs. 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 only saw her as an 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 feminist ideology to create his own perfect woman. Hemingway's masculine view of "the perfect woman," shown through *A Farewell to Arms* by the weak and underdeveloped character Catherine Barkley, was a product of his failures with women in his life and his quintessential vision of a woman's role towards a man.

Hemingway's paragon women for men were characterized with weak traits as shown through Catherine. According to Hemingway's 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). This states, women act weak in order to get what they "ought to want," or, a man. This ideal points out that a woman's ultimate goal should be to get a man so they will not be helpless anymore. She will be able to serve some use

with a man by their side so she must act accordingly to obtain a man. When Hemingway writes Catherine explaining, " You're my religion. You're all I've got," he supports the point that women want and need men by their side (Hemingway 116). Catherine is the portrayal of this ideal woman because, as shown in this quote, she willingly sacrifices herself in order to devote herself to Henry, like a religion where one would sacrifice for a god. Henry is able to act like her knight in shining armor and ultimately rescue her from herself because, as she has shown, she is nothing without him. Many demeaning traits including helplessness and submission were shown in Catherine's character to reflect Hemingway's paragon. He portrayed that women need a man to depend on so, in turn, they do not mind being subordinate. Hemingway made Catherine weak and submissive in order to satisfy his fantasy since the modern women in his life could not achieve these standards.

Hemingway tried to convey Catherine with purity by giving her redeeming qualities that reflected feminine concepts but her submissive traits ultimately made her look desperate. 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 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 prove her worth for Henry which eliminates her purity of being a “ good girl” and highlights her persistently needy nature. Catherine puts all her energy into pleasing Henry and disregards her well being as shown when she overworks during the night-shifts just to be with Henry. This makes her seem obsessed in winning Henry’s affection as she neglects her well being to be with him. Although the counter points out this is intended to set up a romantic mood, this belittles Catherine into nothing more than a prop for the progression of romance. Thus, even with this conjecture, Catherine symbolize the masculine ideal of a female that views women as objects of affection and distractions whose purpose is to sacrifice for men. Although Hemingway used pure qualities to characterize Catherine, her desperation and submissiveness further made her an idealized women of his masculine view.

Catherine’s most prominent trait, being submissive to Henry in order to win his attention, striped her of any individuality she had. Catherine wanted to be with Henry so she let go of all she knew to be solely focused on him. 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). Catherine gave up the ability to make her own choices and promised obedience to Henry. This submission made her dependent on Henry’s will and proved even she saw herself as lesser than him.

Furthermore, Hemingway writes of Catherine always wanting to be associated with Henry as she says, “ There isn’t any me. I’m you. Don’t make up a separate me,” (Hemmingway 115). Catherine sacrificed herself and her individuality when she said “ there isn’t any me.” She did not consider herself her own person, rather, a belonging of Henry’s. Additionally, she preferred to be referred as a “ we” which supports the idea that she wanted only to be with Henry. She was content giving up her individuality in hopes of receiving Henry’s love. This submission gave Henry full control over Catherine which reflects another one of Hemingway’s ideals in a woman.

Another flaw in Hemingway’s portrayal of Catherine was that he did not fully develop her as a character. Much of Catherine’s personality was based on the general image of women which included stereotypes and gender roles. Other 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” 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 of her. 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. In turn, she was a

stereotypical women who wanted to be in love. Catherine was not a fully developed character due to Hemingway's use of gender roles and stereotypes which contributed to her poor portrayal.

Catherine's portrayal is heavily based on Hemingway's masculine values because his negative encounters with women inspired him to create a woman who expressed his ideal standards. Hemingway had many wives and affairs with some of his affairs lasting longer than his marriages. So, Hemingway did not have a positive outlook on women in general, they were replaceable and good distractions at best. Sanderson states, "Hemingway's fictive women may be seen as his wishful makeover of modern women" (Sanderson 176). Hemingway 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 standards. Thus, his female characters turned into a "wishful makeover," since the women in his life left bad impressions on him. 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 authoritative manner, which had caused his father's demise, made Hemingway dislike power in women. Instead, he felt the male should be dominant and in control of a relationship. This swayed him into wanting a weak and dependent woman who obeyed male authority. These ideas, along with many others, are reflected into Catherine to make her the ideal woman in Hemingway's eyes. The women in his life were not able to satisfy what he glorified as womanly so, instead, he embedded his ideal traits into Catherine.

One explanation to why Hemingway portrayed women so poorly could be because he did not grasp the feminine concept of women yet. Hemingway had endured much heartbreak in his love life and he did not look kindly on strong women as shown by his negative attitude towards his mother. His failed marriages prompted him to develop ideas of what a woman should be like rather than what they can be like. By favoring the weak traits in women so men could assume control, Hemingway began to form his masculine ideal by neglecting the feminine approach. This resulted in his inaccurate portrayals of women. Catherine Barkley's 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). His use of generalized roles and flat traits of submission supports that Hemingway did not know how to portray a woman yet. Instead, he used society's portrayal since he could not develop his own. However, this societal view ended up making Catherine frail and submissive. He was not able to create a full and strong character because he did not appreciate the feminine view which resulted in a negative portrayal of Catherine Barkley. Hemingway used his masculine ideas of the ideal woman to create Catherine because he did not understand the feminine perspective yet.

In summation, Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* shows us his portrayal of the ideal women 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 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 frail because she was the outcome of Hemingway's ideas of the perfect woman for a man.

## **Works Cited**

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