

A Feminist Reading of Hemingway's Works —“Cat in the Rain” as an Example

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As a famous American writer, there have been many different opinions on whether Hemingway is a typical masculinist writer. Through a brief analysis of the feminist consciousness in Hemingway's works and a detailed feminist interpretation of “Cat in the Rain”, this paper holds that it is unfair and biased to stereotype Hemingway as a typical masculinist writer since there is a very strong feminist consciousness in his early works.

Keywords: feminist criticism, Hemingway, “Cat in the Rain”, literary criticism

Introduction

Ernest Hemingway, a renowned literary author in America, has long been known for portraying male characters, focusing on the male world and thinking about the nature of men. One of his masterpieces, *The Old Man and the Sea*, which won the Nobel Prize in 1954, revolves around exciting and adventurous activities such as hunting, boxing, bullfighting and war, depicting themes such as bravery, honour, death and sacrifice. Still, the whole novel is devoid of a single female character. Some critics consider Hemingway a typical masculinist writer who discriminates against women. These critics believe that Hemingway's male characters are always tough guys who can maintain “their grace under great pressure”. The female characters are often merely the foil of the male characters. However, it is noteworthy that Hemingway's early works show a strong sense of feminism, paying great attention to women's social and gender roles, and the emotional and psychological problems that arise from them. Among these works, “Cat in the Rain” greatly demonstrates his feminist perspective. Therefore, this paper will interpret Hemingway's work “Cat in the Rain” from a feminist perspective to help readers gain a more comprehensive understanding of Hemingway's writing ideology, and analyse the feminist themes and meaning of “Cat in the Rain” in a new way.

Western Feminist Literary Criticism

Western feminist literary criticism was born in Europe and the United States in the late 1960s and has rapidly developed into one of the most influential schools of contemporary Western literary criticism. It is the academic product of the European and American feminist movement. Feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women (Tyson, 2006). It is a systematic study of women's issues from social,

cultural, physiological and psychological perspectives, focusing on reinterpreting the image of women in traditional literature from a female perspective, exploring female consciousness in literature, deconstructing the male-centred literary-cultural model, and discovering the grand tradition of women's literature. It advocates feminist writing styles and goes on to construct feminist critical theory (罗婷, 2004).

Western feminist literary criticism has roughly gone through three stages: the first stage, from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, focused on how the image of women was distorted in traditional literature, especially in the works of male writers, and criticised patriarchal consciousness in conventional literature. In the middle and late 1970s, the second stage shifted the research interests from the texts created by male writers to the texts created by female writers, interpreted the classic works created by female writers from the perspective of feminism, explored a large number of works created by female writers which were ignored by traditional literary history. Since the 1980s, the third stage, Western feminists have corrected the previous tendency of not being interested in, or even opposed to, literary theory. They began to focus on constructing feminist literary criticism theory in stead of sticking to pure literature itself. Feminist literary criticism shifted to interdisciplinary feminist cultural criticism, and a multi-model feminist literary criticism genre such as psychoanalytic feminist criticism, Marxist feminist criticism, ecofeminist criticism, and postcolonial feminist criticism emerged (申秀娟, 2009).

Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1998) has been called the "Bible" of Western feminism. On the one hand, she argues that Western society is a male-dominated, clannish society in which women are the second sex and subordinate; on the other hand, she systematically dispels the "myth of women" written by male writers and criticises their misrepresentation of women.

Feminism in Hemingway's Works

Critics have long considered Ernest Hemingway a very masculinist writer, even a male cultist. Hemingway's woman characters get mixed reviews, with some radical critics (represented by Edmund Wilson) denouncing Hemingway as a "male chauvinist pig" with a "misogynist complex" (Wilson, 1978). Contrary to these comments, other critics such as Clouseau and Robert consider Hemingway to be a feminist writer, citing female characters such as Brett in *The Sun Also Rises* and Maria in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* as examples of his feminist tendencies and that many of his female characters should not be accused but sympathised with and admired. Some critics have even divided Hemingway's women characters into two categories: angels (ideal women) and demonesses (harmful women) (黄青, 2011). A look at the reasoning behind these criticisms shows that in the 1920s, women were given the right to vote in the United States, and new feminism with a modern consciousness emerged in society, which profoundly influenced Hemingway's view of women (李连涛, 2012). He created a large number of female figures in the hope that he could help to stabilise the complementarity between the men and women. Later, in 1932, when Hemingway went to Africa for the first time, there was a change in his writing style to heroic philosophical writing, and he created a large number of male public figures on which he wrote two more short novels, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (Hemingway, 2002) and "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" (Hemingway, 1987). Hemingway wrote his famous story *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, based on his participation in the war in 1940, in which he expresses his quest for an ideal partner in his later years. Generally speaking, Hemingway was not misogynistic, though he admired "tough guys". It is

too simplistic and subjective to describe him as a masculist or a feminist. It would be more rigorous and specific to describe Hemingway's writing ideology from a diachronic perspective, as his early works reflect a full feminine consciousness on the part of a male writer. Still, he is also by no means a supporter of the feminist movement, which will be an overstatement.

A Feminist Reading of "Cat in the Rain"

"Cat in the Rain", written in 1923, is one of Hemingway's best early short stories. It tells the story of an American couple who travel to Italy and have to stay in a hotel because of the rain. The young wife, who is bored, looks out of the hotel room's window and sees a cat under a table in the rainy garden and decides to get the cat while the husband stays inside to read. On the way to and from the cat, the young wife passes the hotel owner's office twice. The humility and consideration expressed by the hotel owner make the wife feel highly respected. Extremely disappointed that she has not been able to find the cat, the wife returns to the room and told her husband of many thoughts and desires. The husband responds while reading a book. Just then, the hotel owner has the maid bring a cat to the wife. The novel ends abruptly here, leaving the readers with a great deal of room for imagination regarding the novel's themes and many possibilities for us to analyse the deeper meaning of the text. This part will explore the feminist meaning from three relationships between wife and cat, wife and husband, and wife the hotel owner.

Wife and Cat

Superficially, the cat symbolises what the wife wants in her heart, and for what she wants, she is willing to brave the rain to take action, showing the new woman's boldness and courage to think and act.

At the same time, the cat also symbolises the traditional role of women, who is forced to hide under the table from the rain which representing the patriarchal society. The wife, feels pity for "the poor kitty" and wanted to save it, one is because the wife wants to do a heroic thing, that is to save a cat in the rain, namely to save the traditional female role that is still bound by the patriarchal society; and the second is because the cat in the rain is also a symbol of the wife herself, seemingly saving the cat, in fact, the wife is saving the majority of women, including herself.

The wife goes to the table to look for the cat but is greatly disappointed when she does not find it. The escape of the cat shows the avoidance and rejection of the awakening of feminist consciousness by traditional women who have been influenced by patriarchal ideology and have endorsed it. The wife's disappointment is also an expression of the new women's frustration with the stubborn traditional women who refuse to innovate and their helplessness in mourning their failure to do so.

Wife and Husband

When the wife wants to get the cat, the husband first says he will help her and then after her refusal, he tells her "Don't get wet" and let her to do it by herself. This is a sign of respect for the woman, who, in the eyes of the husband, is not a traditional woman who needs his help in everything but a new woman who can take charge and do what she wants on her own.

After the wife returns to their room, the husband puts down his book and asks her immediately, "Did you get the cat?" "I wanted it so much," she said, "I don't know why I wanted it so much. It isn't any fun to be a

poor kitty out in the rain" (Hemingway, 1987, p. 131). It can be seen that the wife is very brave to express her inner thoughts, good at expressing the delicate emotions in her heart to the husband. It can be inferred that the husband is not an impatient person, and often does not mind the wife's trivial thoughts, it is the husband's patience and listening that the wife dares to express, which reflects the husband's respect for the wife's ideas in daily life.

The wife also wants to change her hairstyle and asks her husband how she would like to keep her hair long; he looks at her short, boyish hair and says, "I like it the way it is". Throughout the long history of gender relations, male aesthetics have dominated, setting the standards and norms of beauty for women. Many of these standards highlighted women's physical characteristics to satisfy men's pursuit of functional pleasure. In patriarchal societies, hair aesthetics were branded with social gender. Long hair became an essential index by which men judged women's sexual attractiveness, and women wore long hair for their men. This gradually changed with the rise of the feminist movement, and short hair became an important marker for the new women to assert their equality. The husband expresses his fondness for short hair, and it can be seen that, to some extent, he supports the feminist movement. However, the wife is disgusted with the haircut because it makes her look like a tomboy. It can be seen that although the wife has a feminist consciousness, she is not yet complete and thorough, still affected by the patriarchal society, unable to accept the masculine characteristics of herself, but the husband can be relieved that "You look pretty darn nice". In the process of discussing the hairstyle, the husband George's eyes have never left his wife, which also reflects the husband's respect and concern for his wife. The wife goes on, "I want to pull my hair back tight and smooth and make a big knot at the back that I can feel," she said, "I want to have a kitty to sit on my lap and purr when I stroke her" (Hemingway, 1987, p. 131). The husband also continued to patiently cater to her to reply. However, as the wife keeps to talk, the husband wants her to stop and gets something to read. This paper holds that the seemingly impatient and disrespectful remark by the husband makes the novel more like the daily routine of a real couple. Since the husband is reading throughout the novel, the fact that the husband recommends this reading activity he enjoys to his wife also reflects the idea of gender equality in his consciousness, rather than the idea that women do not deserve to read and learn as is believed in traditional patriarchal societies. The wife continues to express her thoughts even after the husband's stop, reflecting the wife's right to have a voice in the relationship; she will not shut up because of the husband's stop, and is not afraid of her husband, demonstrating the couple's equal way to get along with each other.

Wife and Hotel Owner

In this novel, the hotel owner stands up, bows to the wife as she goes downstairs to get the cat. The wife likes the hotel owner because he would give her a gentle reply when she complains about the rain and show the attitude of willing to help her. When the wife returned to the hotel, the hotel owner bends down to greet her again, which makes she feel "very small and at the same time important". The wife feels "small" because she has failed to get the cat, and the woman's sense of self-esteem makes her feel a little embarrassed, but at the same time, the hotel owner, as a man, still greets the female customers who fail to find the cat. As a bystander, seeing the female guests trying what she wants to do, despite the failure, he is still willing to respect her tries, conveying the tolerance and respect of men for women. It is also the tolerance and respect make the wife feels

"at the same time important". At the end of the novel, the hotel owner sends the maid to bring a cat to the wife. Here, women's wishes and ideas are respected, and not only the husband but also another man who is not close to her is willing to help the wife fulfill her wishes. Hence, the feminist theme of the novel has been sublimated, and respect for women is no longer an act based on love and responsibility within a relationship and a family, but also involves other men and even the whole society to put into action to work together.

Conclusion

"Cat in the Rain" shows some of Hemingway's forward-thinking about the feminist movement of the early 20th century. In the previous textual analysis of "Cat in the Rain", the husband, George, is mostly considered as a masculinist who ignores and suppresses his wife's emotions and needs, and limits her "second sex" subordinate status. The considerate role hotel owner is also regarded as a contrast to highlight the husband's disrespect for his wife. However, this paper argues that the husband's so-called "indifference" is a sign of respect for his wife, a symbol of trust in the new woman's capability of action. The hotel owner is rather as a catalyst for extending the theme of respect for women from a small family to the whole society.

It can be seen that Hemingway not only excelled at depicting men who could face life and death with wisdom and courage, but he also fully understood the "new women". It is biased to stereotype Hemingway as a masculinist writer. The idea that Hemingway's novels are hostile to women is also a misinterpretation of Hemingway's work. It would be better to separately discuss Hemingway's writing gender ideology from his different writing stages, rather than generalizing him into a masculinist or feminist writer.

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