

Images of Women in Modernist Fiction: A Farewell to Arms and to the Lighthouse

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ABSTRACT

Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* are both canonical works of literary Modernism, yet they picture women in almost opposite ways. This article compares Hemingway's Catherine Barkley, a nurse whose identity is built almost entirely around Lieutenant Frederic Henry, with Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, two women who hold incompatible views of what a woman's life should look like and are made to answer to no one but themselves. The study proceeds through close reading supported by feminist literary criticism, examining how each novelist structures interiority, voice, and narrative sympathy around its female characters. Catherine is read through Shoshana Felman's account of madness as a label historically imposed on women and through Judith Fetterley's resisting-reader model, both of which clarify how the novel channels narrative sympathy toward its male protagonist at the moment of Catherine's death. Mrs. Ramsay and Lily are read through Woolf's own writing on the "Angel in the House" and the androgynous mind, concepts that show why the novel refuses to rank domestic devotion above artistic ambition. The article argues that the difference between the two novels is not simply a matter of authorial sympathy but a structural one. Hemingway subordinates Catherine's death to Frederic's grief, while Woolf lets Mrs. Ramsay's death open a space for Lily rather than close one. The comparison is offered not to indict one writer for the benefit of the other but to clarify what a literary text does structurally when it grants a female character interiority and when it withholds it, with implications for how Modernist studies more broadly assesses gendered narrative sympathy.

Keywords: Modernism; Ernest Hemingway; Virginia Woolf; feminist literary criticism; narrative sympathy

INTRODUCTION

A Farewell to Arms and *To the Lighthouse* are routinely taught together as twin monuments of Modernist prose, but they part ways sharply in how they treat their female characters. One author sides with women, working to render their thoughts, feelings, and contradictions from the inside. The other reduces them to figures whose significance is measured by their usefulness to a man. This article examines Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*, arguing that Hemingway characterizes her as little more than a love interest, and then turns to Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* to show how Woolf builds two fully realized women with opposing views of life without shaming either one for the choices she makes. The aim is not to put one novelist on trial for the benefit of the other, but to isolate the disparity between the two sets of female images and to account for it.

A Farewell Tto Arms Bby Ernest Hemingway

A Farewell to Arms is Hemingway's most celebrated and influential novel, saturated with the existentialist outlook that runs through his fiction more broadly. The story draws on Hemingway's own wartime experience, although his own service was less dramatic than his protagonist's. However, it left a mark on him that shaped his later writing. The novel alternates between irony and understatement as modes of expression, and it experiments with the conventions of the war novel it superficially resembles. It is often ranked among the finest novels to come out of the First World War precisely because it refuses the genre's usual interest in glory, choosing instead to dwell on what the war leaves behind.

The novel follows Lieutenant Frederic Henry, an American ambulance driver serving with the Italian army [4]. Frederic is cool-headed and largely stoic, showing little outward emotion even as he drifts through a kind of

internal limbo. The war has begun to wear on him when he meets Catherine Barkley, an English nurse mourning a fiancé killed earlier in the war. After Frederic is wounded and sent to recover in a hospital where Catherine works, the two grow close, each using the other as a refuge and an escape from their own grief. As their romance deepens, so does the war around them. When Catherine discovers she is pregnant and Frederic runs into trouble with the Italian military, the couple flees the warzone to build a life elsewhere. However, their escape fails as Catherine dies in childbirth and Frederic is left alone with his loss.

A Farewell to Arms is a Modernist classic, but its critical reception has never been uniformly favorable. Hemingway is regularly criticized for a depiction of women that many readers find sexist and one-dimensional. Catherine, in particular, is characterized as irrational and simple, a portrayal set against Frederic's cool and controlled masculinity. Catherine is called "crazy" more than once in the novel, by both Frederic and herself. Shoshana Felman examines this labeling in "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy," a rereading of three literary case studies in which women are diagnosed as insane, and asks why literature so often patronizes and silences its female characters, observing that "women as such are associated both with madness and with silence, whereas men are identified with prerogatives of discourse and reason" [1, p. 7]. Catherine's silencing plays out across the novel, most visibly in the final chapter, where she is giving birth and yet is given almost no lines of her own. The scene that should belong primarily to her is instead narratively given to Frederic.

This asymmetry is not incidental to the historical moment in which Hemingway was writing. Sandra Gilbert's "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War" argues that the First World War reorganized literary gender relations on both sides of the Atlantic, unsettling the association between masculinity and heroism even as many male writers worked to restore it in fiction [2]. *A Farewell to Arms* belongs to that restorative effort. Hemingway wrote the novel at a moment when picking a side, politically and aesthetically, was close to unavoidable. And he did not merely pick one; he built it into his prose. Literary manhood in this period increasingly attached itself to a hardened and skeptical masculinity. Uncertain as he is about the war itself, Hemingway's protagonist still comes wrapped in that harder, distinctly American authenticity. The effect is to elevate Frederic above the ordinary business of gender, treating his internal conflict as simply human, while Catherine remains legible only as "woman." This gendering of the two protagonists is not incidental to the plot, it instead structures it. The female characters exist to advance Frederic's story, not their own.

The resulting images of women in *A Farewell to Arms* are flawed, patronizing, and demeaning. Catherine Barkley never exists independently of a man. Before the novel even begins, her identity is organized around a dead fiancé; after Frederic arrives, it reorganizes around him. She is not permitted a self that stands apart from a male counterpart. Even her death is not hers. Hemingway stages that death as an event that happens to Frederic, asking readers to grieve for him rather than for her. Judith Fetterley makes this point forcefully in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*:

If we weep at the end of the book, it is not for Catherine but for Frederic Henry because in the world of *A Farewell to Arms*, male life is what counts. And the message to women reading this classic love story and experiencing its image of the female ideal is clear and simple: the only good woman is a dead one, and even then there are questions. [3, p. 71]

Fetterley is among the feminist critics who have condemned Hemingway most directly for his treatment of women. Her claim that the novel gives greater priority to Frederic than to Catherine is supported by the death scene itself, which is written so understatedly that it feels almost weightless.. Hemingway's Iceberg Theory can explain the flatness of the writing, but it does not fully excuse what the flatness accomplishes here for Catherine's insignificant death simply completes an insignificant life, at least as the narrative renders it. The regressive gender norms of the early twentieth century go some way toward explaining this pattern, but they do not exonerate Hemingway of it.

To The Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf

To the Lighthouse can look at first glance like a novel with barely any plot, an impression that does not survive a second reading. Published in one of the most fertile periods in English literary history, it exemplifies the style that made Woolf one of Modernism's central figures. Woolf herself described the novel's shape as two blocks joined by a corridor: the opening and closing sections, "The Window" and "The Lighthouse," form the blocks, and the brief middle section, "Time Passes," forms the corridor between them.

The novel follows Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, their eight children, and a rotating cast of houseguests through a summer at the family's home in the Hebrides, on the Isle of Skye. The home sits across the bay from the lighthouse that gives the novel its recurring, almost independent presence. The guests include the painter Lily Briscoe, the abrasive philosopher Charles Tansley, the despondent poet Augustus Carmichael, and the hopeful widower William Banks. The narration is third person but keeps sliding into the tone and rhythm of whichever consciousness it is currently inhabiting, a technique built from fragmentation and stream of consciousness. Woolf does not organize her characters' thoughts into anything as tidy as a logical sequence; she renders them as they occur, unfiltered by narrative order. The novel takes up ephemerality, subjective reality, time, art, and gender, and it uses its female characters to resist the social roles imposed on them and to insist on their own agency.

Woolf presents Mrs. Ramsay as a loving, sympathetic matriarch who takes on the exhausting work of caretaking wholeheartedly despite what it costs her. She embraces conventional gender roles, treating marriage and motherhood as a woman's rightful purpose. In her own essay "Professions for Women," written a few years after *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf gave this figure a name: the Angel in the House. The selfless and self-effacing ideal of Victorian femininity that Woolf said had to be killed before a woman could write honestly at all [5]. Mrs. Ramsay is close kin to that angel, and critics have long read her death in the "Time Passes" section as Woolf's own act of killing her off. But the novel does not treat Mrs. Ramsay as a target. If Woolf had meant her death to double as an indictment, the narrative would likely have done more to diminish her. Instead, it gives her interiority equal to anyone else's in the book, laying out her motives for the reader to judge rather than passing judgment on her behalf.

Lily Briscoe, one of Mrs. Ramsay's guests, is an artist perpetually second-guessing her personal and artistic choices, though she arrives by the novel's end at the recognition that her purpose is to make art, whether or not anyone ever sees it. Mrs. Ramsay and Lily hold incompatible philosophies and prioritize different things, and Woolf uses the pair to demonstrate that women should not be poured into a single mold. At one point Charles Tansley tells Lily flatly that "women can't paint, women can't write" [6, p. 48], a line that distills the Victorian prejudice about women's place and against which the novel is written. Lily is furious at the comment, and it continues to needle her insecurities about whether her preference for painting over marriage is the right path. That she keeps painting regardless is itself the rebuttal and an act of resistance. Her art gives her a form of permanence that nothing else in the novel offers her. By the novel's ending, however, she has largely stopped seeking Tansley's approval, accepting herself instead as an independent and self-sufficient artist who paints for her own satisfaction.

Woolf's evenhandedness here is not simply a matter of authorial restraint, it follows from an idea she develops explicitly in *A Room of One's Own*, published two years after *To the Lighthouse*. She argues in the former that the finest creative minds are androgynous, drawing on both a masculine and a feminine register rather than reducing experience to one or the other [7]. Mrs. Ramsay and Lily can be read as two halves of that same coin seeing as one organizes her identity around domestic devotion, while the other around solitary creation, and the novel declines to rank them. Jonathan Culler makes a related point about why this kind of writing feels different coming from a woman, observing that "women's experience, many feminist critics claim, will lead them to value work differently from their male counterparts who may regard the problems women characteristically encounter as of limited interest" [8, p. 45]. Woolf's own position as a woman writer arguably lets her explore the female psyche in ways closed off to her male contemporaries, and it produces characters other women can recognize themselves in without either character being made into a lesson.

The novel's minor female characters receive the same attentiveness. Minta Doyle and Prue Ramsay are minor by any plot measure, but Woolf treats them with the same care she gives Mrs. Ramsay and Lily. Minta is carefree, beautiful, and confident. Unapologetic about her sexuality even as she fits the Victorian mold in most outward respects, and she still has reservations about whether marrying Paul Rayley is right for her. Woolf resists the temptation to settle that question. Unlike novelists who take on the role of moral judge, and who reserve their harshest judgments for women who stray from what is deemed appropriate, Woolf lets her characters remain unresolved. What emerges across the novel is less a verdict on women than an account of the pressures they navigate in establishing a place for themselves, at home and beyond it.

CONCLUSION

This is a narrow comparison set against the much larger body of Modernist fiction, but the disparity it isolates is not incidental to these two novels alone. It recurs whenever a male and a female author take up the same historical material from opposite sides of the gender line, dividing that material's literary treatment. The claim that Woolf's images of women are more just than Hemingway's is admittedly not an entirely detached one. Female readers, in particular, may find it difficult to remain at a distance from the question, since they are more likely to recognize the unflattering, inaccurate, or simply diminished portrayals that fiction has so often offered them. That does not make the disparity less real or less worth naming. It remains necessary to challenge these depictions and to reclaim, where fiction has been careless with it, a more accurate image of what women's interior lives actually look like. Jonathan Culler offers a fitting note to close on, describing what it means to read as a woman in terms that apply equally well to writing as one:

For a woman to read as a woman is not to repeat an identity or an experience that is given but to play a role she constructs with reference to her identity as a woman, which is also a construct, so that the series can continue: a woman reading as a woman reading as a woman. The noncoincidence reveals an interval, a division within woman or within any reading subject and the "experience" of that subject. [8, p. 64]

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