The androgynous Papa Hemingway

by James Tuttleton

A review of Hemingway by Kenneth S. Lynn

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

Kenneth S. Lynn

Hemingway

Harvard University Press, 712 pages, $37.00

“It’s a hell of a nuisance once they’ve had you certified as nutty,” Nick said. “No one ever has any confidence in you again.”

—Ernest Hemingway, “A Way You’ll Never Be”

The posthumous publication last year of Ernest Hemingway’s The Garden of Eden—based on unfinished manuscripts that lay in the vault for more than twenty-five years after Hemingway’s death—created something of a double sensation in literary circles. Begun in 1946, this novel was intended by Hemingway to be his most extensive and mature treatment of the themes of good and evil, innocence and corruption, and sex in its relation to the literary art. But the size and complexity of his imaginative task and Hemingway’s physical injuries and illnesses, culminating finally in a full-blown case of depressive paranoia and his suicide in 1961, prevented him from completing the work, although it deeply absorbed him for nearly two decades.

The manuscript of The Garden of Eden exists in three irreconcilable drafts of varying lengths. To get the story into publishable shape, Tom Jenks, a Scribner’s editor, did a cut-and-paste job on the
longest of these manuscripts (a version of some twelve hundred pages)—deleting a great deal, changing around much else—thus producing the version that we now have. The result bears a suspicious resemblance to Thomas Wolfe’s last two novels, which by common consent are now to be seen as the “compositions” of his Harper’s editor, Edward Aswell. In any case, so altered and manipulated were the Hemingway manuscripts that, in the March 9 issue of The New Republic, Barbara Probst Solomon pronounced the Scribner’s version of The Garden of Eden a “travesty” and even worse: “I can report that Hemingway’s publisher has committed a literary crime.”

Setting aside the literary ethics of publishing unfinished and incoherent manuscripts, not to speak of altering them as Scribner’s has done, The Garden of Eden was no less sensational for its revelation of Hemingway’s sudden and unexpected pre-occupation with transsexual fantasies, androgyny, and gender-merging. While no adequate précis of The Garden of Eden texts can be given here, suffice it to say that the story involves a rather passive writer named David Bourne and his wife Catherine, who cuts off her hair and begins to insist on playing the role of a boy while making love. Into their world arrives a rather shadowy young woman named Marita, who at first sleeps with Catherine but comes to be sexually shared by David as well. Hemingway once referred to its theme as “the happiness of the Garden that a man must lose.”

The myth of Hemingway’s Absolute Masculinity was no doubt his supreme fiction. Hadley and Pauline Pfeiffer (who, after living with the Hemingways for a while, eventually became his second wife). The novel also intimates the Left Bank lesbian underworld of the 1920s, a world that included Natalie Barney, Solita Solano, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, and Jinny Pfeiffer (Pauline’s sister, to whom Hemingway may also have been drawn). Moreover, the book has a clear connection with Fitzgerald and his difficulties as a writer; for Zelda at one point told Fitzgerald that he was sexually inadequate, insinuated that he and Hemingway were homosexual lovers, engaged in an affair with Edouard Jozan, and, as she came unhinged, was herself drawn to other women. In any case, the sexually passive novelist and the sexual perversities in The Garden of Eden appear to have destroyed the last vestiges of the myth of Hemingway as the Man’s Man, the stoic soldier, the virile boxer, the macho big-game hunter and lover of women par excellence.

The myth of Hemingway’s Absolute Masculinity was no doubt his supreme fiction, and he wrote and rewrote the story of it assiduously throughout his lifetime. Yet the myth rested on a bedrock of fact—those flamboyant masculine experiences that set him apart from most writers, whose lives are spent largely in the study. Hemingway’s combat injuries at Fossalta di Piave in World War I, his Greco-Turkish war correspondence, his vivid expatriate life in Paris in the Twenties, his wild adventures in the world of Spanish bullfighting, his daredevil journalism in the Spanish Civil War.

and World War II, the airplane crashes and jeep collisions, the African safaris, the big-game hunts
in Wyoming, the deep-sea fishing in the Caribbean, his four marriages and many affairs, his hard
drinking, hard fighting, and hard loving—all of these enchanted the reporters, made good copy,
and contributed to the legend of the Man’s Man, an image confirmed in superb works of fiction
like *In Our Time*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

Of course, the myth of Hemingway’s exceptional virility began to come under heavy
bombardment even during the author’s lifetime. Women writers, homosexual victims of
Hemingway satire, and plain literary wimps were always ready to invent or purvey gossip about
his so-called manliness, and occasionally it reached the press. Stein publicly called him “yellow” in
*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and in 1933 Max Eastman published a review, called “Bull in
the Afternoon,” in which he remarked that

some circumstance seems to have laid upon Hemingway a continual sense of the obligation to put forth
evidences of red-blooded masculinity. It must be made obvious not only in the swing of the big
shoulders and the clothes he puts on, but in the stride of his prose style and the emotions he permits to
come to the surface there. This trait of his character has. . . begotten a veritable school of fiction-
writers—a literary style, you might say, of wearing false hair on his chest.

For Eastman and his friends, it was “of course a commonplace that Hemingway lacks the serene
confidence that he is a full-sized man.” Furthermore, Frederic Prokosch, in “Voices: A Memoir,”
published in *The New Criterion* in 1983, suggested that others were on to Hemingway. As he
recounts it, when Lady Emerald Cunard met Hemingway in 1944, she told Cyril Connolly:

“I was startled. . . . Not a bit what I expected. You may think it bizarre of me but he struck me as
androgynous.” Connolly replied that that was a very peculiar word to apply to Hemingway. “I am sure
that it is,” she said. “It is not the *mot juste*, perhaps. But that’s how he struck me. Distinctly emasculated.”

But despite the jealous sniping, Hemingway could usually be counted on, during his lifetime, to
defend his virility—sometimes by punching out his detractor the next time he saw him at the
Scribner’s office, or by paying him (or her) back, in print, with interest (as, for example, in *A
Moveable Feast*). Without question he was one of the nastier literary pugilists of his time. His death,
by suicide, however, seemed to give his detractors the last word about Hemingway’s so-called
manliness. Evidently he took, like his suicide-father, the coward’s way out.

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Missing, throughout the writer’s lifetime, was an adequate explanation of why the masculine pose
was so important to Ernest Hemingway. Zelda Fitzgerald might aver that Scott’s hairy-chested
friend was “as phony as a rubber check” and a
proved out from any evidence. Nor did Carlos Baker’s monumental, fact-filled *Hemingway: A Life Story* (1969) make it clear why the novelist should have presented himself as the he-man extraordinaire. Some of the more recent lives, like Jeffrey Meyers’s *Hemingway: A Biography* (1985), Peter Griffin’s *Along With Youth* (1985), and Michael Reynolds’s *The Young Hemingway* (1986), have dealt more or less responsibly with the facts but, again, always without making the inner workings of the writer understandable to the reader.

With the publication now of Kenneth S. Lynn’s *Hemingway* readers are at last in a position to begin to understand the psychological and emotional dynamics of Hemingway the man and to grasp how the elements of his inner life are manifest in the forms of his fiction. Lynn brings to his task the tools of a mature critic and biographer who is already well known for a variety of excellent works of literary and cultural criticism including *The Dream of Success, Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor, William Dean Howells: An American Life, Visions of America, A Divided People,* and *The Air-Line to Seattle.* But never before has Lynn or anyone else demonstrated the depth of psychological insight and understanding that is here brought to Hemingway’s life and work. Lynn’s biography, I hasten to say, is not clinically psychoanalytic; there is no obfuscating technical jargon here—no far-fetched recourse to psychic condensations, obscure displacements, or bizarre dream symbols invoked to explain the latent content of Hemingway’s thought and work.

Muuch of this biography, in fact, is a straightforward re-creation of historical detail: what it was like to live in Oak Park, Illinois, where Hemingway was born in 1899; why Paris, where he lived in the 1920s, had so many horse-drawn vehicles; who went along on Hemingway’s African safaris in the 1930s. On the level of fact, Lynn disputes, convincingly, some of the claims that Hemingway and others made about his exploits. While the evidence is plain that Hemingway was hit by more than two hundred pieces of trench mortar shrapnel at Fossalta di Piave, Lynn discounts the story that Hemingway was also hit by machine-gun fire as, in his wounded condition, he allegedly carried an Italian soldier to the rear. He demolishes the claim that Hemingway later fought with the Arditi in World War I. He disputes Hemingway’s recollections about the origin of some of his stories and has nothing but contempt for the alleged veracity of Hemingway’s account, in *A Moveable Feast,* of how he allayed Fitzgerald’s sexual anxieties, induced by Zelda, by measuring the length of Fitzgerald’s penis and pronouncing it normal. Finally, Lynn’s analysis of Hemingway’s political obtuse-ness, in allowing himself to be used by the American left-wingers and Spanish Communists during the Civil War in Spain, is definitive.

But many of these considerations have been discussed by previous biographers. What is original in this life? And, in particular, what can it tell us about the elements of androgyny that underlay Hemingway’s self-intoxication with masculinity?

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The perverse sexual implications of *The Garden of Eden* are not, according to Lynn, a novelty. Properly read, many of Hemingway’s previous works disclose similar transsexual fantasies, motifs of twinning, and incestuous overtones. The source of these, according to Lynn, is the writer’s relationship to his mother Grace Hemingway, “the dark queen of Hemingway’s world.” One of the novelist’s friends, Major General Charles T. Lanham, described that relationship very simply and directly: “he always referred to his mother as ‘that bitch.’ He must have told me a thousand times how much he hated her and in how many ways.” But precisely *why* Hemingway hated his mother was never made perfectly clear. Stories like “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” and “Soldier’s Home”—in their savage treatments of the mother figure—suggest that Grace was a possessive, dominant, and overbearing woman who had emasculated her husband. And since Hemingway clearly identified in youth with his father, who taught him everything there was to know about hunting and fishing, it was reasonable to infer that Hemingway thought his mother guilty of driving his father to suicide, a tragic event the novelist came to see as an act of cowardice. But, according to Lynn, the reason for Ernest’s hatred of his mother goes deeper.

As the biographer recounts it, Hemingway suffered a deep psychosexual wound originating from his mother’s treatment of him as a child. Grace Hemingway, who had a thing about twins, dressed young Ernest and his sister Marcelline (a year and a half older) in identical outfits—as twins of the same sex. Sometimes she dressed them in boys’ clothes but just as often as little girls. (In a family scrapbook, on one of Ernest’s photographs at age two, she wrote “summer girl,” suggesting the extent to which she regarded him as female.) Furthermore, long after he ought to have been shorn, she insisted on Ernest’s wearing his hair the length of a girl’s. But, paradoxically and at the same time, she played up his masculinity and encouraged him to be a little man. Thus the seeds of an androgynous personality were planted: “Caught between his mother’s wish to conceal his masculinity and her eagerness to encourage it, was it any wonder that he was anxious and insecure?”

According to Lynn, much of Hemingway’s plain meanness to friends and lovers can be accounted for by an anxiety and insecurity arising out of Grace Hemingway’s betrayal of his masculine identity:

At some point . . . in his edenic infancy he awakened to an understanding of the situation in which his mother had placed him. . . . If he was [treacherous to friends and acquaintances], perhaps it was because he thought of himself as a victim of treachery long before he knew what to call it.
The relationship between Ernest and his “twin” sister Marcelline was a highly complicated one. Besides gender confusion, both children experienced confused ego boundaries and felt not merely twinned but androgynously and incestuously intimate. In adolescence, the tomboy Marcelline had a clear crush on her brother. He evidently repulsed this; offended, she later refused to go to his wedding to Hadley Richardson, a woman eight years his senior.

Hemingway, it would appear, may have turned from this problematic “twin” Marcelline to their younger sister Ursula. The incestuous overtones of the story “The Last Good Country” suggest that possibly they were intimate. Certainly in 1950 Hemingway wrote to Arthur Mizener that, when he came back from the war in 1919, his seventeen-year-old sister Ursula always used to wait, sleeping, on the stairway of the third floor stair-case to my room. She wanted to wake when I came in because she had been told it was bad for a man to drink alone. She would drink something light with me until I went to sleep and then she would sleep with me so I would not be lonely in the night. We always slept with the light on except she would sometimes turn it off if she saw I was asleep and stay awake and turn it on if she saw I was wakeing [sic].

In any case, there can be no doubt that Hemingway’s stories are filled with love relationships where couples feel like “brother and sister,” where the length of the woman’s hair is itself fetishized (if that is possible), where the protagonist’s penis is mutilated (“God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen,” The Sun Also Rises), where reversals of gender or at least of coital position are suggested, or where Hemingway seems fascinated by the idea of sex with a lesbian woman. Paris was awash with lesbians in the 1920s, and he was not oblivious to the flamboyant posturing of Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien, Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Djuna Barnes, Jane Heap, Winifred Ellerman, H. D., Margaret Anderson, and Solita Solano. He was remarkably close to a number of them and, even more surprising, he claimed to have been sexually attracted to the older and obese Gertrude Stein (who appears to have resembled Grace Hemingway in size). In 1948, Hemingway told W. G. Rogers, author of When This You See, Remember Me: Gertrude Stein in Person, that he had liked [Gertrude Stein] better before she cut her hair and that was sort of a turning point in all sorts of things. She used to talk to me about homosexuality and how it was fine in and for women and no good in men and I used to listen and learn and I always wanted to fuck her and she knew it and it was a good healthy feeling and made more sense than some of the talk.

As Lynn points out, Hemingway never directly fictionalized these lesbians. His protagonist in The Sun Also Rises, however, Jake Barnes, has a name suspiciously close to that of Natalie Barney, who lived at 20 rue Jacob. Does this tale—involving a hero without a penis who cannot penetrate the mannish Brett Ashley2—distortedly symbolize a transsexual fantasy of lesbian love? In the light of The Garden of Eden, Lynn’s analysis of the book is compelling.

His treatment of gender merging in A Farewell to Arms is also persuasive. How are we to read the
love scenes between Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley? Is she a submissive woman to her virile lover? In bed, Catherine tells Frederic, “Pm you.” She says, “Don’t make up a separate me.” “I want us to be all mixed up.” She asks Frederic to let his hair grow and proposes to cut hers off, so they will be “the same.” He is reluctant because, sexually passive, he likes to lie under her, to assume the “female position,” enclosed in the tent of her hair. According to Lynn, these scenes are not evidence of the Hemingway woman’s abject submission to masculine domination but rather transsexual fantasies that haunted Hemingway throughout his lifetime. In deriving their names from that of his friend Barklie Henry, Hemingway “thought of them as the two halves of an androgynous whole.”

Likewise, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the real issue between the lovers Maria and Robert Jordan is not macho domination of a mindless and compliant woman but rather Hemingway’s recurrent fantasies of what it would be like to merge into a woman. Maria’s head has been forcibly shaved by the fascists, but Jordan wants to take her to his barber in Madrid so that their hair can be styled identically, so that they will (twinlike) resemble each other. Lynn puts it this way:

Pilar observes of them very early, “You could be brother and sister by the look,” to which Maria replies, “Now I know why I have felt as if I have. Now it is clear.” Jordan, too, likes to think that he and Maria are related. “Maria is my true love and my wife. I never had a true love. I never had a wife. She is also my sister, and I never had a sister, and my daughter, and I never will have a daughter.” In their nights of lovemaking in his sleeping robe, these look-alike siblinglike lovers feel so much a part of one another that it is as if they have merged (“I am thee and thou art me and all of one is the other”) and could switch identities if they wished (“if thou should ever wish to change I would be glad to change”).

The important point here seems to be the recurrent and irresistible longing in some part of Hemingway’s psyche to experience and recount life as it is felt by a woman.

The ultimate value of Lynn’s biography is that it returns us to the idea that a writer’s overt “political” themes—say, the effect of the “dirty war” on Nick Adams, Jake Barnes, or Frederic Henry—may conceal affective states originating in the very personal wounds received in childhood, wounds of which the author was not fully conscious. Even the elements of a literary style, according to Lynn, may be a manifestation of this kind of ill-understood trauma, rather than a reflection of the brevities of journalism or the corruptions of language in the patriotic rhetoric of wartime:
To be a boy but to be treated like a girl. To feel impelled to prove your masculinity through flat denials of your anxieties . . . and bold lies about your exploits. To be forced to practice the most severe economy in your attempts to ‘render’ your life artistically, because your capital of self-understanding was too small to permit you to be expansive and your fear of self-exposure too powerful. To make a virtue of necessity by packing troubled feelings below the surface of your stories like dynamite beneath a bridge. To betry by your enormous ambition into writing a novel, despite the risks inherent in amplitude. To ascribe your protagonist’s disablement to a flying accident in war-time Italy (an echo of the way in which D’Annunzio lost an eye), rather than to a subtler malaise. To turn the Great War, in fine, into a Great Explanation and proceed from there.

But if Hemingway’s affective disorders had their origin in Grace Hemingway’s disorientation of her son’s sexual identity, it is worth remembering that androgyny has a literary history and a cultural provenance and may, at a particular time, be merely a theme, like any other. Freud had dignified for Hemingway’s generation clinical matters that literature had mythicized and that sexologists like Krafft-Ebing had cloaked in Latin secrecy. Writers of the time were quick to bring to the surface of literature the new “psychological science.” Sherwood Anderson, whose influence on Hemingway is demonstrable, wrote about such an imaginative sexual transformation in “The Man Who Became A Woman.” Pound likewise invoked the double-sexed Tiresias in Canto I and made the Ovidian metamorphosis of men and women (into beasts, into trees, into the forms of one other) a central motif of his epic. And T. S. Eliot in The Waste Land (1922) objectified in Tiresias (“Old man with wrinkled female breasts”) both the genital wound that fascinated Hemingway and the motif of the two sexes merged into each other. Hemingway was not oblivious to these elements of literary modernism. Is it any wonder, then, that at the heart of The Garden of Eden he presents a symbol of androgyny: Rodin’s statue of the merging sexes based on the Metamorphoses of Ovid? (References to the statue are unfortunately excised in the Scribner’s edition.)

All writers, if they are any good, are capable of imagining what it is like to have the body of a member of the opposite sex and to have the feelings of that sex. The cultivation of an androgynous sensibility is a necessity of the artist; certainly it is a feature of what Keats called “the chameleon poet,” who, emptied of himself, can be filled with the ideas and feelings of another wholly alien to him. But the imaginative taking over of another person’s identity, especially of another person’s sex, is especially problematical for the writer who already has a weak ego and an insecure sense of his own sexuality. Lynn has brilliantly shown what it was that caused Hemingway to be so anxious and insecure of his own masculinity and how he masked his confusions by flamboyant posturing as the Man’s Man. It is hard to disagree with his conclusion that while Hemingway’s “faults were terrible he was also a more truly heroic figure than even the gaudiest version of his myth would grant him.”
The effect of Lynn’s biography is to send us back to the novels and stories with a new and heightened sense of how intimately Hemingway longed to experience the sensibilities and sensations of a woman and how he dramatized those feelings. If Barbara Probst Solomon is correct in thinking that The Garden of Eden is “a sort of summa of Hemingway’s aesthetics,” with sexual metamorphosis as its cornerstone, the put-down feminist critics will have to take another look at his work, for things are evidently not as they seem. Stories like “Up in Michigan” and “Cat in the Rain,” viewed in the light of Lynn’s account of Hemingway’s inner conflict, take on a new poignance and depth and set at naught the claim that Hemingway’s women characters are nonentities. And the great novels in the Hemingway canon now require a full critical reconsideration, not as case studies of a neurosis but as dramatizations of some very old issues in male-female relationships—issues first suggested in Plato’s myth about the androgynous soul in search of its twin.

_Hemingway_, by Kenneth S. Lynn; Simon & Schuster, 702 pages, $24.95.

The precise nature of Jake’s wound is somewhat ambiguous in _The Sun Also Rises_, and some readers have concluded that he was castrated. But Jake’s facetious conversation with his friend Bill, in which he refers to “the joystick,” suggests a penis injury, as well as the airplane instrument. In 1958, George Plimpton raised this issue with Hemingway in a conversation subsequently published in _Writers at Work_. In the interview Plimpton casually remarked at Jake’s having been “emasculated precisely as is a steer.” Hemingway’s response authorizes the interpretation of the wound that Lynn has properly assumed throughout the biography: “Who ever said Jake was ‘emasculated precisely as a steer’? Actually he had been wounded in quite a different way and his testicles were intact and not damaged. Thus he was capable of all normal feelings as a man but incapable of consummating them. The important distinction is that his wound was physical and not psychological and that he was not emasculated.”

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 6 Number 2 , on page 67
Copyright © 2021 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com
https://newcriterion.com/issues/1987/10/the-androgynous-papa-hemingway